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Second November Number

Rustlers' Trail

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

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SECOND NOV 1937

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Vol. LXXVII

RANCH ROMANCES

No. 1

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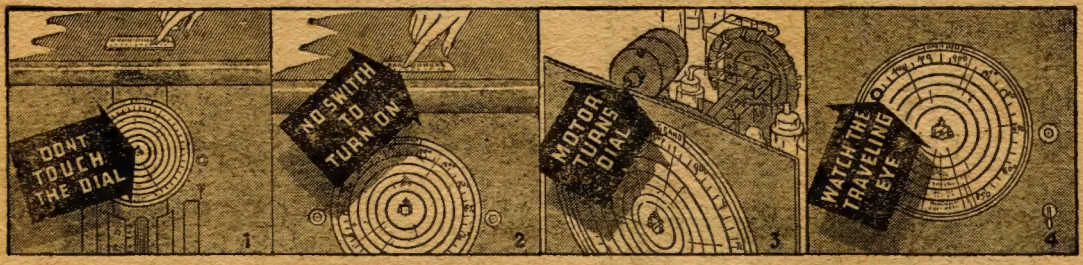

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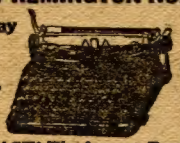

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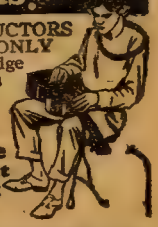

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"Already a little coil of smoke was rising. . ."

Rustlers' Trail

By Victor Rousseau

Dan Gerry, alone on the trail and desperate, comes across greedy plotters and vicious murderers who have a stranglehold on the girl of his dreams.

CHAPTER I

"Draw—and Pray!"

SNELL, the town marshal, crooked a finger insolently at Dan Gerry as Dan rode slowly along the single street of Newbury, and Dan pulled in his bay, Blaze. Snell, paunchy, gray-haired, double-jowled, strutted up to him, his star gleaming on his flashy waistcoat.

"I see you got your duds with you," he said, pointing a stubby forefinger at the slicker roll on the cantle of Dan's saddle. "So Powell give you your time, huh?"

"Well, supposin' he did?" asked Dan.

"Oh, nothin', nothin' at all," answered Snell, "except that I'm glad to see you're ridin'. You can make the State Line by midnight without stretchin' the legs off that horse of yours, and there's plenty ranchin' jobs over in the real cow country."

Dan began rolling himself a quirly. "I'd be interested to know why you're kind of invitin' me to leave town in such a hurry, marshal," he said.

"I'm suggestin' it," answered Snell, "because a young feller like yourself is liable to git into trouble in a town like this. There's too few jobs and too many temptations. You was lucky to git a chance punchin' on the Broken Bar, and it's too bad you couldn't make good. That sort of spoils your chances in Newbury. Then all I was sayin' was, I'm glad to see you ridin'."

But the fat marshal's pompous complacency was slowly wilting under the amused, appraising stare of Dan's ice-blue eyes. Dan struck a match and applied it to his quirly; he looked up the street.

Newbury was a boom town. Rumors

of oil in the vicinity, backed by the tapping of two feeble gushers, had brought it into existence within the space of a few weeks, with its shacks, its flimsy stores, and the four honky-tonks, whose radios and mechanical pianos were just beginning to send out their blare with the advent of sundown.

The crowds were thickening. Punchers were forcing their mounts through them, to squander their earnings on the tables or the dance-hall girls; here and there a soft-stepping gambler was to be seen, and the whole mob was congregating about Dutch Joe's, which was the best equipped for entertainment.

Less than three months before, steers had pastured where the main street of Newbury ran. Now speculators had arrived from all points of the compass, and, following them, the motley crowd that speeds to each new frontier. Following them, the vultures, male and female. And behind all was the hand of Lew Easton, the State boss, stretched out across the mountains and the miles of desert that divided Newbury from Easton's own fat pastures.

It was Easton who was behind Ben Hart, the boss of Newbury, behind Dutch Joe and every other honky-tonk keeper, behind Town Marshal Snell and the gunmen, bouncers, and even the dance-hall girls. Every one of them paid him tribute. Moreover, Hart had been one of Easton's chief henchmen in former days. Hart represented Easton's interests in Newbury.

Dan Gerry puffed at his quirly in silence for half a minute. He was being ordered to ride on, and he had intended to ride on. He had been riding on all his life, ever since he ran away from the orphanage in Willow City, ignorant of everything except that he came of decent ranching stock, and that his parents had both died of a fever epidemic within a year of his birth, twenty-two years ago.

He had learned to ride and shoot, he had punched cows and roamed from place to place as the mood took him. But he had never been discharged for incompetence before.

"Somethin' you didn't say, marshal," he observed. "About why Powell gave me my time. Now it's not news to you about that old lady back in Kansas City, whose brother's ranch is bein' sold at auction for her. Nor how the inventory of the stock left out some three hundred shorthorns that the late owner possessed."

"You accusin' me of makin' out a crooked inventory?" spluttered Snell.

"I'm sayin'," Dan returned, "since you brought the subject up—I'm sayin' it might suit Powell and his crowd to get rid of a hombre who didn't aim to play ball with them at the tallyin' next week, and has his own opinion about them steers that are always comin' and goin'—comin' from the north and goin' toward Mexico.

"Shucks, marshal, when I go crooked, I won't go crooked with other fellows' cattle. And I'll think up somethin' bigger than robbin' an old woman of three hundred steers, and splittin' the proceeds half a dozen ways, after the big fellows get their rake-offs."

The marshal's rage-red face glared up at Dan. But something in the look of those ice-blue eyes alarmed the marshal. This was a Dan Gerry he hadn't suspected, but it was a type he had occasionally encountered during a career, large chunks of which he found it convenient to forget. Before he could collect his wits to answer, Dan, with a wave of the hand, had ridden on into the crowds, not realizing that he had just issued a declaration of war.

Where the crowd was thickest, about Dutch Joe's, Dan drew rein. He still meant to ride out of town, to ride on and on, driven by that wanderlust that whispered that somewhere, some time, he would find the things he had never had—a home, land, cattle, some girl whose love would bring him peace.

These things had always seemed impossible of achievement to Dan. A

DAN GERRY

few weeks with one outfit, a few with another—that had been his record ever since he ran away from the orphanage. Now, desperately homesick at the sight of the bright lights and the mass of men, he thought with repugnance of the long ride through the dark ahead of him. Hardly considering what he was doing, he eased Blaze into one of the few vacant spaces at the racks along the street, dismounted, fastened the reins to the tie-rail, and mounted the wooden steps that led up into the honky-tonk.

Inside, the blare of the music, the noise of the throng, was deafening. A crowd was lined up at the long bar, shouting for drinks. Through an open doorway behind it, Dan could see Dutch Joe, fat, blond, and servile, his bald head gleaming in the lights, in conversation with Ben Hart, the town boss, a man in his thirties, slight, slim, dark, wiry, alert as a cat, and with a reputation as a gun-slinger.

In the long room behind, a score of men were dancing with the painted women of the place, a nickel piano augmented by two fiddlers, keeping time to the tune, and a negro beating a snaredrum, his eyeballs rolling as he thumped out the rhythm. In another room, running at right angles to the dance-hall, the gambling was already in full swing, the tables were crowded, and the click of the ivory balls punctuated the monotonous calling of croupiers and faro-dealers.

A pretty, painted girl came up to Dan. "Hello, stranger, wanna dance?" she smiled, extending her arms in invitation.

Dan was no Puritan, would hardly have understood that frame of mind, but the sight of these girl waifs always brought back memories of his childhood. The fellows had always laughed at his behavior toward girls of that class, ascribing to timidity what was actually a profound pity. Dan shook his head, and, heedless of her sudden shrill curses, made his way into the gambling-room.

"Hey, Dan, want to sit in a poker game?" a voice hailed him.

Four men were playing poker at a round table. Dan recognized the man as Pete Welsh, a little shriveled man of forty-five or fifty, whose means of livelihood were a mystery. During the two months he had been in Newbury, he had lived at the hotel, he was drunk all day and night, dressed expensively, and always had a thick wad of bills.

A second man was one of the hands of the Broken Bar; the two others, whom Dan didn't know by sight, were a puncher for some other outfit, hilariously drunk, and a smooth-voiced, white-handed individual in a black coat, gambler stamped all over him.

Dan slumped into a vacant chair. Why not, when he had fifty dollars in his pocket? He hadn't the gambling instinct, but he liked the companionship, craved it before starting on that long night ride to nowhere in particular.

He won, and had raked in a big kitty before he saw that the gambler was fleecing the drunken puncher, and that the two others were tacitly abetting the gambler. He watched the gambler's hands as he dealt. Their speed was marvelous. Dan didn't like that game. He'd quit as soon as he had lost enough to be able to retire.

The gambler had the pack again. Oh, well, a hombre like the drunk, who got

into a game like that, deserved what was coming to him. Just so long as Mr. Gambler didn't try his stuff on him! Protecting other hombres wasn't a fellow's job in a poker game.

A glance at the card delivered, face down, showed Dan that it was the ace of spades. The next card he got, dealt face up, was the ace of hearts. He opened for five.

Glancing up at that moment, he saw Snell standing in the entrance, with the Broken Bar foreman, Powell. He fancied they had been speaking about him, from the expression on their faces. Yes, Powell glanced at him and sneered.

Dan's third card was the seven of diamonds, and his fourth the ace of clubs. He now had three aces, but only two of them exposed.

Powell and Snell walked slowly over to the table, and stood watching the game.

Dan's fifth card was the seven of hearts. He now had two pairs, ace-high, exposed, but the card that was face down made his hand a full house. He bid cautiously, letting the drunken puncher run up the stakes. He had thrown his last ten-spot of his wages on the pile when the gambler softly said, "I'll see!'

"See that and beat it!" roared the puncher, throwing down his cards. Full house, but queens and nines. Dan laid down in turn. Full house, aces high. And then he suddenly grew conscious that the white-handed gent had picked him for his bait in turn.

For he found himself staring at four kings, lying face up on the table. And then he realized that he had been seeing something very interesting for some time past, without quite realizing it, for those white hands were very deft.

"Just hold it!" he said quietly, placing his left hand over the kitty. With his right he picked up the pack, and dealt two more aces successively from the bottom. "You sure got two packs mixed, Mister," he said quietly, and dealt the gambler a back-handed crack across the face that spilled him and his chair.

With a roar of rage, the drunken puncher hurled himself upon the prostrate man. Instantly the table was overturned, bills and coins went skidding along the floor, and the two pummelled each other viciously, until the gambler managed to make a soft-footed exit, leaving the still prostrate puncher bellowing and fumbling for his gun.

Snell crashed into Dan. "I told you to leave town. Now I'm takin' you in. Raise 'em!" he bellowed, making a grab for Dan's sixgun. "I was watchin' the play, and you two was in cahoots to swindle Monaghan."

Dan's hand was over his holster. Foiled, the town marshal drew. He was drunk, and in a blind fury. Dan saw the ring of faces that had gathered about him, hard, jeering, merciless. For everybody there knew that Dan had been marked down for a scab, who wouldn't play the Easton game. If anybody wouldn't play ball with Marshal Snell or Boss Hart, it was too bad, that was all.

Powell's voice broke in: "I warned you, Marshal. I see this hombre was no good, so I looked up them references he gave me. Traced him back to an orphanage in Willow City. Pupped by the wayside, by a ——, he was!"

Dan hadn't made up his mind whether or not to hand over his gun. But, at Powell's words, he trembled with a cold, icy anger. He was afraid, but only of this fury in himself. Snell saw it in Dan's face, and his gun-hand began to quiver.

"Grab the roof, I'm warnin' you!" he yelled, in a strange falsetto.

Dan jerked the marshal's gun out of his hand before the phrase was finished, and swept it in an arc that ended between his eyes. Snell screamed and staggered back, blinded by the blood streaming from the jagged tear the gun had made in his forehead.

Dan backed against the wall. "I'm goin' to kill you for that, Powell," he said in a voice as cold and impersonal

as that of a judge pronouncing sentence. "Draw, damn you. Draw—and pray!"

The flood of obscenities that had started to flow from Powell's lips was ending in something like a wail. Desperately the foreman glanced right and left. But Powell had no backers, for Newbury was a man's town, and this game had to be played by the time-honored rules. And there was something so unexpected, so sinister, in that crouching figure, with the ice-blue eyes, that a sudden hush of fear came over the room.

They had already scattered well to the right and left. Powell stood alone. Dutch Joe, who had come waddling in from the bar, stopped in his tracks. Through the entrance peered the faces of other men, and of the frightened dance-hall girls.

"I'm countin' three," said Dan, in a voice that had sunk to a throaty whisper, yet was audible throughout the room. "One! Two . . . ."

With a hoarse cry of despair, Powell tugged at his gun. It had just cleared the holster when Dan's was in his hand. The word "Three!" was cut off by two sharp reports.

That crouching figure seemed scarcely to have moved. It stood motionless, a thin wisp of smoke still issuing from the gun-barrel. But a black, cork-shaped hole had sprung out in the center of Powell's forehead. And the foreman, already dead on his feet, though his hand still clenched his gun, was falling, falling forward.

He crashed at Dan's feet.

CHAPTER II

The Outlaw Trail

HIGH, shrill screams of the dance-hall girls broke the utter silence that had fallen. The noise broke the tension that had gripped Dan and now his brain cleared. Sweeping his gun in an arc, he broke through the crowd, which scattered right and left of him, past Marshal Snell, blubbering as he applied a blood-soaked handkerchief to his forehead, past fat Dutch Joe, scrambling for safety.

Whaim! A slug hooted past Dan's cheek and crashed into the wall. Dan saw Ben Hart crouching in front of the crowd, his dark, saturnine face convulsed with killer rage. But before he could fire again a terrified dance-hall girl ran screaming in front of him, and then Dan had broken through the crowds about the bar, and was in the street. He was at Blaze's side; he was in the saddle.

From the honky-tonk a hundred voices were shouting, a hundred men were pointing toward the shadowy side of the street, out of which Dan was already backing Blaze. But the crowds were too thick to permit concerted action. Dan was away before the renewed roar that went up indicated that he had been spotted by the frenzied mob.

Dan turned Blaze in the direction opposite that which he had planned to take, because on this side of Dutch Joe's the road was comparatively empty. He spurred Blaze through the little groups. Two men, leaping for safety, were knocked down, but Blaze was too well trained to step upon a prostrate human. A gun cracked, and Dan's hat tilted sidewise on his head. And then he was through, and opposite the last line of shacks spread out along the street.

The yells behind were shrill with blood-lust. It would take three or four minutes for Hart and Snell to get their posse together. That wasn't any too good a start, even though Blaze could outstrip most horses in a short spurt, and had all the endurance of his stocky Arizona breed.

But Dan reined in for a moment. That road ran through the desert for a hundred miles into the fertile valleys of the western part of the State. On either side of the road the land was

supposedly waterless, inhabited only by rattlers and gila monsters.

To take that road was suicide. Dan turned his horse away to strike off across the range toward the desert.

A fresh outcry behind him told him that his maneuver had been seen by riders, too timid to attack until the posse came up, but hanging onto his heels. Behind them, all Newbury seemed to have become a pandemonium. But Blaze was eating up the range, though, and glancing back, Dan could see a score of riders, black against the moonlit sky, detach themselves from the skyline of shacks and string out in pursuit. He leaned forward in his hull, calling encouragement to the bay.

Ahead, seventy miles northwest, lay the Tomahawks, a hundred and fifty, miles in length, extending down to Mexico, a barrier between the desert and the fertile lands beyond them. Nobody had crossed that desert, save by the single road that Dan dared not take. Dan was taking a short cut, shorter than the road, but supposedly impossible. And he wondered why he was riding. It wasn't fear of the death, stark and certain, that would await him in Newbury. Perhaps in the depths of his mind was that constant dream that beyond those mountains lay the things he had always asked of life and never won.

He heard the whistle of slugs, the crack of rifles. He looked back again, and saw that he was gaining. Blaze was slugging away with all his might, head down and shoulders heaving to the mighty mechanism of his loyal equine body.

The range became mesquite. Abruptly then began the desert, at first spotted with sparse tufts of grass, then sand and stone. The lights of Newbury behind had dwindled to a flicker on the horizon. The rifle shots had ceased. The posse was no longer visible.

On into the night, guiding himself by the stars, Dan rode. At last, when he felt safe, he reined in, lit a quirly, and considered. Only a few desperadoes inhabited the Tomahawk country, which, spread out in a wild tangle of mountain and scrub-covered canyons, held the desert in its lap like a great sandy bowl. If Dan could win through to the Tomahawks, there was the chance of freedom.

"It's all right, boy," he said, rubbing Blaze's head. "We'll make it. We're comin' into sweet grass country. Sweet grass and water for you. And for me, that little ranch we used to think about, and—her. . . ."

Yet he knew that only by a miracle could he hope to reach the Tomahawks. Through the rest of the moonless night Dan rode Blaze at a lope, dismounting now and again to rest him.

It was amazing how quickly the night passed. Dawn spread over the desert like a gray veil, the east grew luminous, the veil lifted, and the sun rose. Far ahead the jagged peaks of the Tomahawks were now visible. All about was the utter barren flatness of the desert.

Slowly the sun rose into that bright blue bowl above, sending down an infernal heat that drenched horse and rider with sweat. Across that sandy oven, without a drop of water, horse and rider now plodded, Dan walking ahead and Blaze following. Dan had cut strips from his saddle blanket and bound them about his scorching shoes and Blaze's hoofs. When they wore into tatters, he cut and bound fresh ones.

The sun rose to the zenith, and the mountains looked no nearer. How far had they traveled? Thirty-five miles? Forty miles? It was impossible to guess how far away the mountains were, for the heat mirage danced grotesquely over the desert's face.

Dan heard himself talking, and realized that he was growing delirious. His whole body, which had long since ceased to sweat, cried out for water, and his tongue was like a gag in his mouth.

Dan's mind wandered as he plodded on. . . . The desert had disappeared. He was in a green land. He was standing in the doorway of his little home, and she was coming toward him—the girl he'd never met, would never meet. Dan had never speculated what she would look like, yet he had thought she would be a little older than this girl, who seemed only on the threshold of young womanhood. Slender, fair-haired, she stood before him, a happy smile of welcome on her face.

Dan stretched out his arms, and the vision vanished. He was in the desert again, and the sun was cruelly blazing down upon him.

Hours passed. Sometimes Dan was back at the orphanage again, sometimes riding the range. Only an automatic part of him went plodding on. . . . Of a sudden he pulled himself together. The sun was midway in the west. The Tomahawks seemed nearer.

He went back to Blaze. A hoarse nicker broke from the creature's throat, and it raised its anguished eyes to Dan's, as if seeking his aid. Dan put his arm around Blaze's neck, sweat-caked with alkali.

"We're not beat yet," he croaked. "We'll make it. Sweet grass and water. Only got to keep goin'. Damn you, I'll beat you!" he raved, shaking his fist at the sun.

Hours more. . . . Suddenly Dan knew that he was besting it. He was besting that round, red, malignant eye above him, now dipping fast into the west. Again he pulled his mind into a unity as he realized that the mirage devil was gone. They were nearly through! There were the Tomahawks before them, with brush-grown slopes, and high, jagged peaks rising above them! There would be water there—water!

But Blaze's knees were buckling. Tremors ran through the creature's body. Slowly it bent its legs and with a strange dignity lowered itself to the sand. Again it nickered, faintly now, as it looked up at Dan.

Blaze's tongue was black against the dried foam on the bit. But the eyes were not glazing. They were bright, appealing, heartbreaking in the intensity of faith in that human aid that Dan couldn't give.

Dan stooped over his horse. "Listen, boy, listen," he said. "You and me, we got to go on. I don't want to leave you. If I do, I can't help you any. If I could, I'd carry you into the mountains, but you got me on the spot, Blaze, and there's water there, if you—"

He broke off suddenly as the faint crack of sixguns sounded from some point among the peaks ahead of them. Four or five more shots came, rolling from peak to peak and dying away. Then, black against the red eye of the sun, now almost flush with the face of

DOREEN McIMRAY

the desert, a horse came galloping toward them.

Standing over Blaze, Dan watched its approach incredulously. At first it seemed to him that this must be a hallucination. But then Dan knew that it was true. The wild race changed to a trot, and, as the creature approached, Dan could see that it trailed a fragment of harness behind it, and carried something round on one side of its back—something that had had a counterweight on the other side, which had fallen off, leaving the round object

thudding against the beast's flank as it moved.

The trot became a lope, an amble. The beast came up to Dan and stopped. Dan saw that it had been hideously wounded by an expanding slug, which had torn through its belly, exposing part of the viscera. Apparently it had instinctively made for man's aid—to die.

But that thing upon its flank—God in heaven, it was a water-keg! It was a water-keg, and nearly full, for the water within it surged and gurgled as Dan rocked it.

He tore it from its broken harness and dropped it on the ground. Up-ended it. Whispered to Blaze, because his tongue filled his whole mouth now, and he couldn't utter a sound. The horse, smelling the water, rose to its feet and nickered. Then Dan managed to get the little keg in his hands, and the bung out, and, holding it aloft, poured a stream of clean water down Blaze's throat.

"Hold 'er there, boy!" he whispered, as Blaze nosed eagerly for more. He set the keg down, dropped on his face, and drank. His throat, his whole body absorbed it like a sponge. He had to tear himself away.

"We've licked the sun!" he mumbled. "Licked them both, the sun and the desert, Blaze!"

Blaze nickered and nosed at the keg, but Dan pushed him away. The strange horse, a stocky gray, was standing by, with drooping head. It was waiting, erect, for the great summons.

Dan put his sixgun to its head, and fired.

Afterward Blaze and he drank again, and Dan splashed the few remaining drops of water on his face, to rid his eyes of the alkali dust that clogged them.

Then Dan remembered the firing, and connected it in his mind, for the first time, with the runaway horse. Outlaws, no doubt! Fortunately Blaze and he were now in the dense shadows cast by the mountains. They would probably be unseen in their approach, unless they had been seen already.

"We got to go on. Think you can make it, Blaze?" asked Dan.

Blaze rubbed his muzzle against Dan's arm, and nipped playfully at his sleeve. That drink had apparently almost restored him.

They went on, following the tracks that the runaway had made in the soft sand that covered the face of the desert hereabouts. But that sand was becoming sun-packed earth, and clumps of mesquite were beginning to dot the plain. The clumps grew thicker. High overhead towered the foothills of the Tomahawks, whose higher peaks were still luminous from the glow in the western sky. Now they began to thread a canyon, and now another.

A trail appeared, but made rather by beasts than men, for it wound aimlessly, passing around fallen stumps and boulders. At times it was hardly perceptible in the gathering twilight.

They were ascending toward a long ridge that ran straight on either side above them, and the mesquite had given place to jack-pine and piñon brush. Suddenly Dan stopped. His ears had caught a low cry, that of some creature in distress.

It came again. That was a human moan! A child's moan or a woman's! It came from some place in the scrub some distance to the left, about half-away between the high ridge overhead and the bottom of the ascent up which Dan had been toiling.

Dan called, but no answer came. He flung the reins about a sapling and began pushing through the thick undergrowth, stopping from time to time, listening and calling. But still no answer came back.

Back and forth he went, beating the scrub in the gathering twilight, until he came to a little open space ringed with jack-pines. And it was there Dan found her—the girl of his dream!

Blond and little, and just as young as he had seen her in that vision upon

the desert. Perhaps eighteen, no more. Caught by her short skirt when she had tumbled or been thrown from the ridge above, and hanging perilously, head downward, between two jack-pine saplings.

CHAPTER III

Lead Poison for Coyotes

DAN GERRY lifted her in his arms. She was half-conscious, and, at his touch, she seemed to come to herself. She moaned, and began to struggle, aiming piteously ineffective blows at his face.

"Leave me alone! Let us go! We're doing you no harm!" she moaned.

Dan took her small hands in his and held them firmly. "It's all right, Miss, you're among friends," he said. "Leastwise, I'm here to help you. What's happened?"

She seemed to understand, and ceased to struggle. Her eyes opened, and fixed themselves upon his face. Big, glorious gray eyes, rimmed with black. Terror subsided into bewilderment. Dan saw a thread of blood oozing from a bruise on the girl's forehead. She must have been stunned by the fall.

"Where's Dad?" she moaned.

"That's what I'm aimin' to find out, Miss," answered Dan. "Tell me what happened."

"I don't know. It was so sudden. Three men started shooting at us. I wanted to stay with Dad, but one of them came after me." A shudder ran through her. "I lost my head and ran, but I don't remember falling."

"First thing," said Dan, "is for me to help you up. Then I'll go find your dad for you."

But his heart wasn't in his words, for he was sure that her father had been killed.

Well, he'd know soon. He put his arm about her slender waist and helped her to ascend to the summit.

It was nearly dark now, but Dan could see that the ridge formed a natural trail, running as far as he could see beneath the crest of the mountains. It was not a made road—no cart had ever passed that way, for there was not a rut in the oozy surface. But sign showed that steers had passed that way repeatedly. There were traces that might have been a year old, and others that showed the movement of a considerable herd quite recently.

At the top, Dan said, "Now listen to me. I want you to trust me. I'm goin' to look for your dad. And I want you to stay here, in this clump of jack-pines, and not to move or make a sound, whoever comes along the trail, till I call you. Will you promise me?"

"Yes, I promise," she answered. Dan didn't like her apathy, or the vacant stare she gave him. "It's that way—only a little way back there."

Dan led the girl into a clump of pines and cautiously went along the trail. He was pretty sure the gang wouldn't leave the vicinity till they found the girl—or her body. Probably they were camping somewhere near for the night.

Abandoning a momentary idea of getting Blaze, Dan walked along one edge of the trail and shielded his body from observation, as well as he could, by a thin screen of underbrush. And he had gone no more than one-eighth of a mile before he saw that he had reached the end of his journey.

Around a curve in the trail he saw a large, uptilted cart with a dead horse beside it. Food containers and bags were scattered on the ground. On the other side of the trail, under a large, projecting rock, a fire was burning, sending up a cloud of heavy smoke, that blew in Dan Gerry's direction and effectively concealed his movements.

As Dan stopped, he heard a drunken laugh, and then a jeering voice:

"Too bad you ain't never had no luck with the women, Shorty. Betcha you'll find her layin' at the bottom in the

mornin', with every bone of her body broke."

"Hell, Ben Hart won't care so long as she's dead," came a second voice. "But it's jest too bad fer you, Shorty. Me, I never cared none fer baby dolls like her, but, knowin' how your taste lies that way, why in hell did you let her git away from you?"

Dan stopped dead in his tracks at the mention of Ben Hart's name. Ben Hart, as everybody knew, had been sent to Newbury by Easton, to extend his empire there. Dan felt a shiver of revulsion at the thought that Hart was operating in the Tomahawks too; Dan thought he had put his past behind him.

He crept closer, in the lee of the thick gusts of smoke that were drifting across the trail. He was now immediately opposite the gang, with the overturned cart between them, and yet invisible in the smoke. And then of a sudden Dan saw something that turned him sick with horror. For under the cart lay the corpse of an elderly man, with a long, red-gray beard, lying flat in his own death blood. The whole back of the head had been torn away by a slug.

It wasn't necessary to speculate on who this man had been. The girl's father, of a certainty.

As a gust of drunken laughter succeeded Shorty's words, Dan's horror was succeeded by blind, killing fury. Dan leaped forward through the smoke. "Throw 'em high, you ——!" he roared. "Come out!" He had to give the three that chance, as he had given Powell his. Couldn't bushwhack even a nest of murderers. But he hoped he wouldn't have to let any of these human vermin live.

Yells of surprise and terror answered him. Then guns cracked, and tongues of red flame leaped. Dan had quit the shelter of the cart, and was crouching, still shielded by the smoke. He wasn't thinking about his chances, one against three. He couldn't die, and he knew it. He loosed his sixgun till the cylinder was empty. He heard the ping of slugs upon the cart-wheel, and others whirring past his ears. Crouching low, he thrust in fresh cartridges.

But they weren't needed. The firing ceased amid hoarse screams of agony. One of the three came stumbling out, clutching at his belly, and howling like a dog. One rocketed into the air like a shot partridge, and collapsed inert in the heart of the fire. The third man was already lying dead under the rock roof, blood trickling from the side of his face.

Still shrieking and clutching at his belly, the surviving member of the three darted past Dan, and was instantly lost to view in the scrub.

As Dan halted a moment, motionless in the mere physical relaxation after the tension, he heard the scramble of hoofs on the ridge a little above him. He dashed through the scrub, just in time to see the wounded desperado galloping away, clinging desperately to his saddle. And after him, riderless, galloped the two other horses that had belonged to the dead men.

Dan cursed at the fellow's escape. It wasn't likely he would get far, but he would probably drop in some inaccessible spot, and the chance would be lost of discovering what part Ben Hart had played in the murder of the old man, and why. He went back to the cart and removed the body from beneath it.

A handsome, stalwart, rugged old fellow the dead man had been. Death had come to him instantly, with the impact of the slug into his brain. Dan could reconstruct what had happened. The cart must have broken down, and the old man was trying to load its contents upon the two horses—had actually loaded one with the water-keg—when the treacherous attack came. The one horse, maddened with fear and pain, had galloped down the descent into the desert. The other had been shot dead.

Dan went through the pouch and

pockets of the dead man, and found that they had evidently been rifled. On one of the dead desperadoes he found a roll of a hundred dollars, which he guessed, from the careful way in which it was folded, had belonged to the murdered man. He put it in his pocket. There was nothing more of value, no letters or papers, only a coin or two and the photograph of a dance-hall girl. Nor were there any papers among the contents of the cart.

And it was while he was bending over these, examining them by the light of successive matches, that a shrill scream of horror fell upon his ears. He whirled, to see the girl standing in the middle of the trail, looking at the body of her murdered father. Rigid as a statue she stood here. And that single cry was the only one. But she was falling, falling as stiffly as a statue falls when Dan caught her and lifted her in his arms and laid her down.

For a moment he thought the shock had killed her. Then, placing his cheek against her lips, he felt the faintest breath. She was in a deep swoon. He must get her away before the wounded outlaw had a chance to summon any confederates hidden about. And it would do her no good to let her see the body of her father again.

Dan had seen a spade among the cart's paraphernalia. It was almost dark now, but in a few minutes he had succeeded in digging a grave in the soft soil beside the track and lowering the old man's body into it. He tumbled a few rocks upon it, heavy enough to enable the dead man to sleep without attention from the coyotes.

Then Dan went down the slope for Blaze, and found him manifestly uneasy at his master's absence.

"Well, we won through," he told him. "Sweet grass and water, Blaze, soon as we've won through these mountains. And we found her, Blaze, we found her!" Dan wasn't superstitious, but he had a simple faith that this was the girl whose vision had come to him in the desert.

HART, SNELL and BARBER

He hurried Blaze up the slope, for he had a constant fear of the arrival of more of the crew. He had been afraid, too, that the girl might awaken and run away. But she was still unconscious. Dan tied a strip of bacon and a little bag of flour to his saddle. Then he raised the girl in his arms. To his surprise, she stirred and opened her eyes.

Dan didn't know what to do. How could he break the news to her that her father was already buried? But she put out her hand for Dan's, and got upon her feet, and her first words told Dan what had happened to her mind:

"I don't know where I am. Did I get lost? Am I far from my father's ranch? We live at Avon."

"What State?" asked Dan.

"Why, Avon, Nebraska, of course."

"What's your dad's name?'

"His name's—his name's—why, it's slipped my mind! I'll tell you in a minute."

But she couldn't. Dan saw that all the events of the night, and probably those of weeks before—everything leading up to the murderous assault had slipped her memory. Dan was no psychologist, wouldn't have known what the word meant, and yet it was plain to him that memory had been mercifully destroyed, as the alternative to madness. Every day the papers re-

count some similar case of amnesia—loss of memory through shock.

"My name's Doreen," she said. "Doreen—I—I don't seem able to remember. It was stupid of me, falling asleep out here. I guess I'm not awake yet."

"Don't try to remember yet, Miss Doreen. My name's Dan Gerry. We've got quite a little distance to go. Maybe we'll have to spend the night in the mountains. But we'll get somewhere in the morning. You get up on my horse, and I'll lead him."

She obeyed at once. She trusted him. She didn't seem to be curious, didn't ask any questions. Where a trail branched off from the fairway toward the crests of the mountains, Dan turned the horse and struck out through the scrub growth. And for an hour, under a sky brilliant with a half-moon and stars, he pursued his course, guiding Blaze carefully over a terrain that at times seemed almost impassable, and aiming always at a distant pass that seemed to promise a gateway through the Tomahawks.

Twice he passed gurgling streams, and Blaze and he drank. From time to time he would step back to the horse's side. "Don't fall asleep and slip off," he warned Doreen.

"I won't," she promised. "I'm not very sleepy now."

But Dan could hardly raise his feet from the ground when at last he decided that they were far enough from the scene of the murder to be free from any possible discovery. He halted in a little open glade ringed by big trees, with grass enough for Blaze's breakfast.

"I believe I am sleepy," admitted Doreen, as Dan lifted her from the saddle.

She was so slight, and so pitiful, with her big gray eyes looking into his with a puzzled expression, as if she knew that something was wrong, and was afraid to ask him. Dan's heart thrilled to a new tenderness as he made her lie down, and covered her with a blanket.

"Now you try to sleep," he said. "In the mornin' the sun will be shinin' and everything will look different."

Doreen fell asleep almost immediately, with her cheek on her hand. Dan watched over her from his place among the pines near-by. Who could she be, and why had her father brought her in the cart hundreds of miles westward from Nebraska? And what part had Ben Hart played in the murder?

Well, in the morning, surely she would remember. But, with that remembrance, there would also come the realization that her father was dead. It wasn't a pretty prospect that Dan had to face.

Once he tiptoed over to her and looked at her. She seemed like a child, fragile, ethereal, as she slept profoundly in the glade. Of one thing Dan was sure—she was the fulfilment of that dream he had had upon the desert.

CHAPTER IV

Through the Mountains

DOREEN was the first awake. It was her movements that awakened Dan. He sat up, stiff from the long tramp, the soles of his feet feeling sore and blistered, but otherwise not much the worse. Near-by, Blaze was cropping the fresh grass beside a little brook. And the sun was shining, sending down long shafts of light through the trees.

For a moment Dan's heart thrilled with joy at the presence of the girl, and the bright summer morning. And then his spirits sank. He'd have to tell her now. She might want to go back, even to see her father's body disinterred—there was no telling what might happen. But consternation followed dismay, at Doreen's gay, yet restrained greeting. He could see the blank look in her eyes. She didn't remember. Again, though he was no psychologist, Dan knew that she didn't remember.

"Good morning, Miss Doreen."

"Did I tell you my name? I've forgotten yours."

"Dan, Miss Doreen. Dan Gerry. We had a kind of a long trip last night, but we ought to find a way through the mountains by noon. There's towns beyond, and rangeland."

Subtly, not quite knowing it, he was trying to provoke her memory, but all she answered was, "That will be nice." And Dan could see she knew something was wrong, and wouldn't speak about it.

What was he going to do with her when they won through the mountains? Dan's fifty had been scooped up by the crowd when the table was overturned; all he had was a ten, which he had kept for months, for emergency—and the hundred dollars, which he was sure was Doreen's.

"Let's get some sticks and build a fire," she said.

"You sit down and enjoy the sunshine. I'll do the chores."

"Then I'll fill the kettle," said Doreen gaily.

They ate together, bacon and flapjacks, washed down with clear, cold water. Doreen was rather silent, as if puzzled. Then suddenly she said:

"You know, I hate going back home without any money. Dad's had such a hard time this past year. I want to earn some money to go home with. Do you suppose there are any jobs over there?" She pointed across the mountains. "It's hard to get jobs here in Nebraska, these times," she confided. "But I'd do housework or anything. You see, we're starting West as soon as the bank sells the ranch, to stay with Mother's brother, and it's not likely there will be much left after the mortgage is paid."

There was a sweet, undefinable burr in her voice—Dan had noticed it before. It sounded Scottish, but it was not the conventional Scotch that Dan had heard.

"Where's your uncle live?" Dan prompted.

She only stared at him, that look of haunting fear again in those great, gray, black-rimmed eyes of hers. Dan saw that she had been on the verge of remembering she wasn't in Nebraska, and her father had been done to death. He sensed the deliberate act of unconscious will that closed out that memory.

He hastened to change the subject. "I guess it won't be hard to find something to do," he said. "And now I guess we'd best be startin'. Feel able to walk? I reckon it's no use tryin' to ride Blaze under these trees through this cat-climbin' country."

They started, tramping out their own trail through the pine-scrub, aiming at that cleft in the mountains, not very far away. But they had to make innumerable detours. Here was an impassable tract of swamp, there a sheer precipice; now they toiled, panting, up the mountain side, and again they slid down into a canyon amid a shower of shale and stones, sure-footed Blaze always following.

At first Dan took Doreen's hand; then, when she grew breathless, or when the ascent was too steep, he would put his arm around her and she would laugh happily up at him, until suddenly Dan would see that doubt and fear clouding her face again.

This comradeship was something Dan had never known. It was what he had always dreamed of. To have her with him always! To have the past forgotten, and her memory restored. Not to be a penniless range outlaw, probably with a price already on his head, and with every man's hand against him!

What he was going to do with Doreen he wouldn't even think. Sufficient to itself this day! They halted for a brief rest at noon, and ate the remainder of the cold flapjacks. The pass loomed up before them, close at hand. And then suddenly Dan came upon the fairway again.

It was a broad trail, made by the trampling of many steers. A herd of several score must have passed that

way recently. Looking back, Dan could see that this passage probably united with the natural road he had struck on entering the Tomahawks. He could trace its contours through the scrub for miles. Suppose it ran down to the Border? Suppose there was another route through the mountains, debouching not far from Newbury, and those steers that had been constantly appearing on the Broken Bar had been brought through the mountains?

However, Dan wasn't interested in that now. They were approaching the pass. They dropped five hundred feet between two giant peaks, and, in the blue distance below them, saw a great valley, rimmed with hills, and green with sweet grass, and, in the far distance, the roofs of a town, swirling in the heat rays. They had beaten the Tomahawks, which lay behind them.

"That looks like a town over yonder," said Doreen, as they stopped at the summit. "Do you think—do you think—"

Suddenly she was weeping desperately against his breast, and he was holding her as if he could never let her go again. For a long minute he held her so.

"Don't cry now! Don't cry, honey! Everything's goin' to come out all right!" he kept repeating.

She raised her tear-stained face to his. "I don't know who I am," she whispered frantically. "I don't know my own name, except Doreen. I don't know how far I am from home, or why I got off the train on the way back from school."

"It'll all come back," Dan said.

"I don't want it to come back. I don't want to remember. I'm afraid terrible things have happened. I don't know who you are, Dan Gerry. I just want to go on and on like this—with you."

Her lips were so near Dan's. But he dared not kiss them. Dared not take advantage of her helplessness. In another minute Doreen had grown calm again.

"I'm foolish," she said. "I know everything will come out all right. Oh, look at this old cabin!"

They had struck a trail and at the side of it, under a beetling crag of rock, stood an old miner's shack, rotting with age, and almost hidden by the scrub that had sprung up around it.

"Wouldn't it be fun to live all alone in a place like this, with somebody you loved—I mean all alone," she added in confusion.

"Now I wonder which you did mean," Dan laughed, at which she grew more confused still.

He set her upon Blaze, and walked beside her over the range, gay with the flowers of early summer. Here and there, as they progressed, he saw bunches of fat Herefords, and, on the right, far away, was a long ranch house with sheds and corrals, looming up against the background of the mountain. But Dan saw no riders.

The sun was well down in the west before they neared the town. The range was broken here, the land was poorer, and overgrown with weeds and low mesquite shrubs, and now and again a scared, thin-flanked longhorn would leap up and bound away. Three or four little ranch houses appeared in the distance, looking little better than nesters' shacks.

Then they were in the environs of the town, whose signs proclaimed it to be named Tomahawk. It looked old, as cow-towns reckon age in the West. Perhaps it had been settled for thirty years. There were neat houses on the outskirts, the spires of two churches, and what looked like a long business block of the usual stores with their false fronts, with the horses hitched at the racks along the streets, and a rider or two and a few scattered pedestrians.

Near the outskirts of the town Dan saw a large building, neat, two-stories, with trees planted around it, and an extensive yard behind, in which a crowd of boys and girls were at play on swings and seesaws. Dan checked his

horse, ignoring the few curious wayfarers who were staring at them, and read the sign chiseled in gold letters over the entrance: Tomahawk Orphanage.

It struck him like a dagger-thrust, for instantly he knew that, for the time, at least, this was their journey's end, Doreen's and his. He thought of the orphanage that had blackened his first childish memories. That hadn't been a place like this. That had been a county charitable institution, run on a régime of hunger, terrorism, and brutality, while the sound of the children's happy voices told Dan this was different.

He mentally fabricated some story that might seem plausible to the superintendent and lifted the girl out of her saddle. He started up the short flagged path. Doreen said nothing, but Dan didn't dare look at her face.

At one side of the entrance, Dan read a framed and printed placard:

This Orphanage Was Erected
in Memory of
Janet Abigail Marsh
for Homeless Children
of Any Creed or Color

Dan rang the bell, and a cheerful young woman, looking half-Indian, opened the door.

"I'd like to see the Superintendent."

"Won't you please come in?"

They entered a prettily furnished room, through whose western windows the last red rays of the sun were streaming. Folding doors at one end opened, and a pleasant-faced, white-haired woman of about fifty years came in.

"I'm the matron, Miss Marsh. My mother founded this orphanage. I see you're a stranger," she explained. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to speak to you, ma'am," Dan stammered.

"Sit down, my dear," she said to Doreen, and led Dan into a little room at the rear, with a big desk in it. She looked at him silently, waiting.

"Could you take her in for a while? Is she too old? She's got a hundred dollars." Dan placed the wad on the table. "You see, ma'am, she's lost her memory. Don't even know her name, except Doreen. Thinks she's still in Nebraska."

"And you?" asked Miss Marsh, raising her grave eyes to Dan's face.

The lies that Dan had concocted

JUDGE PRICE

passed out of his brain, leaving only blankness. He couldn't lie to this woman with the kind eyes and gentle face. He heard his hoarse voice speaking, as if without his volition:

"I'm wanted for a killin', ma'am. Killed a crooked hound in a town two nights ago, for what he said about my mother, whom I never knew. I waited for him to draw, and killed him, and made my getaway through the desert. No man could call my mother that and live."

Dan wondered afterward what he would have done if she had screamed, or called for help. She didn't even flinch. Just kept her calm eyes on Dan's face till he had finished speaking, then simply said:

"Now tell me about Doreen."

Dan told her, about all except Ben Hart. That was his private score to settle. "If you'd keep her till that hundred dollars is gone, maybe her memory would have come back by

then," he suggested. "I'm afraid some of that gang may—"

"Don't be afraid. Just remember to keep your own counsel. Never talk. Confide in nobody."

"Never had anybody to confide in, ma'am," Dan answered grimly.

"I'll take care of her," said Miss Marsh. "We're not only for little children. We try to help everybody who needs our help. Somehow the money always comes in. You're sure this money is hers?"

"It's hers, ma'am. It was on her dad's body."

"I'll take it then. And I'm going to let you out the back way without seeing her."

"Never, ma'am?"

Again those quiet eyes were fastened on Dan's face, reading him.

"Yes, but not now. You can come back in a day or two, to see how she's doing. I shall, of course, have to break the news of her father's death to her. It's going to be a great shock to her, naturally, but she'll be all right soon. I'm a doctor, and I know."

She hesitated. "I must warn you, when she remembers the past, she may not remember you. Or, again, she may," she said.

"That will be all right either way, ma'am."

Miss Marsh put out her hand. Quiet, efficient, business-like, she was indicating that the interview was at an end.

"You won't mind my seein' her again, after what I told you?" Dan inquired.

"I'm not your judge, Dan Gerry."

"Ma'am, there's just one thing more I want to say. Her dad was bringin' her West. When she remembers where she was goin', I'd like to help her on her way. And I'm aimin' to stay around for a while and hunt down any more of that gang of coyotes who killed her dad."

"If you wish to undertake that task, nobody can help you but yourself."

Miss Marsh's lips were closed in a tight line. Dan saw that she wasn't going to commit herself in any way. But he felt that she would not betray his confidence.

CHAPTER V

Riot in Tomahawk

WHEN he left the orphanage by the back entrance it was already growing dark, and there was an uproarious noise in a lighted room below, children's voices and the clatter of plates and cups.

The vicinity of the orphanage was empty, but there was a crowd at the end of the poorly lighted long street, and Dan could hear them shouting.

They were not gathered about a honky-tonk, however. If there was one in this sedate little town, there were no bright lights to indicate it, such as had illumined the exterior of Dutch Joe's.

Well, first thing now was to get Blaze and himself something to eat. Then a bed. That ten dollars he had kept tucked away against emergencies was certainly going to prove useful. Dan walked the horse about three blocks down the street, until he came to a hotel. He looked inside. Three old men were drinking sedately in the barroom, but there was no dance-hall, no gambling-room.

Dan walked his horse around to the back, watered him at the trough, and led him into the stable. Several other horses were in the stalls, but nobody appeared to be in attendance. Dan selected a stall, removed hull and bridle, shook out some oats into the manger, and pulled down a good feed of hay into the rack.

"I told you we'd make it," he said, rubbing the horse's neck and flanks with a handful of straw. "How we're goin' to live tomorrow is another question. But have a good night, Blaze."

Nobody was at the desk when he went to register, but a little red-headed waitress was standing at the door of

the dining-room, apparently getting ready to close up.

"You looking for a room?" she asked. Dan assented, and she went behind the desk. "Try 36, at the end of the hall," she said, handing Dan a key. "Ridden a long ways, stranger?"

Dan nodded. "And how about some eats?" he asked. "I dunno if I'm tireder than I am hungry, or hungrier than I am tired."

The girl looked at Dan's trim figure in smiling approval. "Well, the dining-room's closing up, but, seeing that you're a stranger, maybe I could rustle you up something, Mr.—Mr. Matthews," she said, reading the name that Dan had just written in the book.

The name of Matthews had flashed into Dan's head. It had been the name of the superintendent of the orphanage at Willow City, the tyrant of his boyhood. It wasn't nice, having to go under an alias, and Dan had never done it before, but that was the penalty of being an outlaw. Well, Matthews would do as well as anything else.

"That'll be fine," said Dan. "I ain't particular. Just ham and eggs or anything."

He went upstairs and found his room, and tossed his slicker roll upon his bed. Then he went down to the empty dining-room. When the red-head brought his tray, he asked:

"Where's all the folks tonight? It don't look to me as if the hotel business was exactly booming in this town."

"Well, you sure are a stranger," smiled the girl. "Why, everybody's gone to the meeting tonight. Can't you hear them?"

As she spoke, Dan became aware of a dull, confused clamor in the distance. In fact, he had been aware of it for some time, but then one was accustomed to night noises in Newbury.

"Don't sound like a church meetin'," said Dan.

"Church nothing. It's this new Valley Association. Lew Easton's agreed to meet up with them in the town hall. But they won't get nowhere with him and that woman he's married."

"I heard of Easton. Live here, does he?" asked Dan.

"I'll say he does!"

"Sort of boss in this part of the State, I heard?"

"Now you said something," the girl retorted. "Boss is the word. Before he married that woman, and engineered that deal with the packing companies, taking over their local business, Tomahawk was as nice a little town as you'd find anywhere on the map. Now, nobody can call his soul his own. Easton owns the banks and the cow business and the packing and the transportation, and the judges, and even Sheriff Bunce, who was elected to oppose him last year. You wouldn't think it mattered to us girls, I suppose, but, if I didn't vote for his ticket, I wouldn't hold even this job."

"What's this Valley Association?"

"Why, it's some of the nesters and small ranchmen, who've thrown in together. He's made them desperate, hogging the range, and crowding it with steers, and damming up the Tomahawk, so they've even got to buy their water from him. Once he gets them out, we'll all be dumb slaves. So long as there's anybody left to fight him, it kind of nerves us to go on hoping."

"Uh-huh! Kind of an old story, though," said Dan. "It's happenin' right now in a hundred places in the West. You was speakin' about Easton's havin' married recent?"

"That— Well, I won't lower myself by giving her the name I'd like to!" snapped Red-Head. "She treats the whole town like we were dogs. And what was she before she married Mr. Haddon last year—poor, foolish old man? Burlesque actress, they say she used to be, out on the Coast.

"You might as well know what everybody else knows," the girl went on. "You see, Mr. Haddon was an old bachelor. He owned the Circle I, that's the best part of the Valley. Built it up years ago. Nobody could have

been a better neighbor. Never had trouble with nobody. Maybe he was a little fond of the girls, but nobody thought he'd ever marry. Then he got in with Easton, who had made Tomahawk his headquarters, and the two of them went on a trip to the Coast together.

"And what does Mr. Haddon do but marry that woman? And dies two months later, leaving her the Circle I. Senile decay, the doctor called it. Soon as he was in his grave, that woman showed her hand. Hard? Hard as nails, except when she falls for some good-looking cowboy, but that's the least of it. All the while, folks say, she'd been Easton's decoy. Easton wanted to get his hands on Tomahawk, and that meant principally the Circle I. So he planted that woman on the old gentleman. Maybe they'd been pretty close before, Easton and her. Anyway, two months after Mr. Haddon was in his grave, she married Easton. And that's that."

"Looks as if that ought to be an interestin' meetin' tonight."

Tired as he was, Dan couldn't refrain from going out to see what was happening. He had been eating while the girl was talking, and now, draining his coffee, he pushed back his plate and placed the ten-dollar bill on the table. Taking his change, and leaving a tip for the girl, he took his hat and strolled up the street.

He could see that the mob was packing the street, and suddenly, above the isolated shouts, a hoarse roar of rage went up. Dan saw the black forms swaying and milling in front of a square, substantial building about two blocks ahead of him.

Dan forgot he was tired. Jammed back against one of the stores, he looked across the street, and saw a bald, elderly man, with cruel, sullen lips and a face like a turkey buzzard, emerging from the building, flanked by four tough-looking plug-uglies, with sixguns in their hands.

"There he comes! Damn you, Easton! Kill the ——!" shouted the man next to Dan. He looked like a nester, his deeply tanned face above the dirty flannel shirt was convulsed with hate, and the sinews of his neck stood out like whipcords.

Another nester came running down the steps of the building, and weaving into the throng. "Gawd, he won't give us nothing!" he bawled. "Called us range tramps! Two hundred dollars for the ranch my pa made!"

Hoarse yelps of anger answered him. But the crowd shrank back before the menace of Easton's guards. Dan saw one man leap forward and shake his fist in Easton's face, and the next moment one of the guards dropped a gun-muzzle upon his head, and he went sprawling down the steps, while the crowd, screeching invectives, scattered to right and left.

A dozen resolute men could have settled with Easton's guards. It was quite evident that the spirit of the nesters had been broken, and that Tomahawk was badly cowed. But from the end of the street there came a louder outburst of shouting. Dan saw four riders plunging through the throng in the direction of the town hall. The foremost of them was a woman. There came a mad roar as her horse swerved suddenly.

"Gawd, she's killed a kid!" Dan heard.

"Naw, her daddy's got her! The kid's just hurt. She let her horse trample it!"

A shabby, middle-aged man appeared, with a limp child in his arms. "To hell with you, Belle Easton!" he shrieked. "To hell with you, you Barbary Coast ——!"

The four riders pulled up suddenly in front of the town hall. Now Dan could see that the woman was about thirty years of age, wearing an elaborate riding costume. The black hair beneath her hat framed a pretty, painted face, and carmined lips set in a derisive smile. It was a type Dan had seen a hundred times before, ca-

vorting about the floors of dance-halls, in the arms of punchers. But he had never seen it successful, insolent, derisive, as he was looking at it now.

As the woman and her three guards reined in, there was a momentary intermission of silence. Dan saw Easton

BELLE EASTON

moving down the steps of the town hall toward his wife. And then suddenly the mob went mad.

There was no concentrated action. They leaped forward in a sudden spasm of fury. Yelling their fury, they swarmed about the woman and her guards. Sixguns cracked, bodies heaved, and then the mob had pulled Belle Easton from her horse, and were beating her, mauling her, tearing the clothes from her body.

To do her justice, she didn't cower. She fought back like a wildcat, raking the faces of her assailants with her carmined nails; but she had reverted to type, and the torrents of abuse that poured from her lips justified the red-headed waitress's remarks about her origin.

The surge of the mob had swept Dan forward until he was almost at the woman's side. He saw a nester, crazed with rage, draw back his fist to slug her in the face. Dan's arm went around his neck and yanked him backward.

"Lay off the woman!" Dan shouted.

In another instant he, too, had become the target of the maddened mob, which had evidently mistaken him for one of the guards, who were themselves down, struggling under a mass of men. Planting himself in front of Belle, who stood gasping, shrieking, Dan struck out right and left.

He sent the foremost of his assailants reeling back under the force of his blows, but he couldn't hold back the whole crowd. Guns were flashing, too. . . . Dan didn't mean to use his gun if he could help it, but he might have to. . . .

Above the yelling, infuriated faces about him, Dan could see Easton, with his vulture's face, standing against one of the pillars of the porch. He was shouting and waving his arms, but he didn't seem to be going to his wife's assistance.

Then suddenly a man leaped forward with a yell, and swung his gun. The muzzle dropped on Dan's head, and Dan reeled dizzily. He felt himself sinking under the weight of human bodies, pressing him down. Hands clutched at his throat, throttling him. The world was going black.

CHAPTER VI

Baby-face Bunce

SUDDENLY Dan was loosed. The clatter of hoofs rang in his ears, and a score of riders came plunging into the crowd, yelling, trampling them down, and using the butts of their quirts upon their heads. Leading them was a wiry man with a small mustache. Dan saw him draw and empty his gun into the crowd, which dispersed in frantic terror.

In another moment the street was comparatively empty, save for Easton's guards, three writhing forms in the road, and five or six wounded men, limping and crawling to the shelter of the stores along the street.

Dan got up, straightened himself,

and pulled himself together. Somebody was holding him up, and he realized that it was Belle Easton.

"Thanks, cowboy," she panted. "Here, stand on your feet, you're too heavy for me. You're the only man among them all," she sneered at her discomfited guards. One had a black eye, two had split lips, and the shirts of all of them were torn to ribbons. Meanwhile the mob of mounted punchers, still whooping and discharging their guns, were riding back.

"How are you feeling now, cowboy?" Belle Easton asked Dan.

"Guess I'm all right," mumbled Dan. The world was righting itself again. Easton's men were closing in, ugly looking hombres, most of them half-Mex or more—Border breeds.

"You damn fool!" Belle Easton sneered at her husband. "I warned you not to talk to these swine. Rangerats, who ought to have been thrown out long ago!"

"They thought I was afraid of them. I guess they know better now," answered Easton. Vulturine and pompous though the man looked, it was easy to see that he was putty in his wife's hands. Not much guts to him, in spite of his looks, Dan thought.

"A lot of help you were to me! Look at this blouse!" Belle Easton turned to Dan again, with a dazzling smile. "Who are you, cowboy?" she asked. "Stranger, aren't you? Well, if you happen to be looking for a job, there's one waiting for you right now at the Circle I. I can use a man with guts there."

She shot a contemptuous glance at her guards. Then gave Dan another smile, whose significance was unmistakable. Dan had made a big hit with her. What was more, it was evident she didn't care who knew it, Easton least of all.

At that moment a stout, middle-aged man, wearing a star on the waistcoat of his black suit, came on the scene, accompanied by two others wearing badges.

"Oh, good-evening, Mr. Bunce," said Belle Easton, with elaborate sarcasm. "Looking at my blouse? Yes, I was under the impression that we had a sheriff here. On the job when everything's over, as usual, aren't you?"

"I stayed off the scene," answered Sheriff Bunce, speaking with a pronounced Texas drawl, "because Mr. Easton asked me to. Calculated it was goin' to be a peaceable meetin', and there wasn't no need stirrin' folks up by a display of force."

"Force?" sneered Belle. "I guess that's just a word out of the dictionary to you, Mr. Bunce. Well, the Circle I can take care of itself without your assistance!"

Dan could see the situation. It was pretty clear to him that Easton had ordered the sheriff to stay away so that he could teach the townsfolk a lesson. His own punchers must have been waiting near the town hall. They had just arrived a couple of minutes too late to save his wife from being mauled, that was all.

Dan looked at Bunce, trying to size him up. Dan had never seen a sheriff of that type before. He had seen brave ones and cowardly ones, straight ones and crooked ones, but all of them had some sort of front. And Bunce had no front at all.

He might have been close on fifty. The hair beneath his hat was yellow-gray, and his pink, clean-shaven face, with its double chin, looked ludicrously like an overgrown baby's. The man seemed inoffensive to the verge of pathos. He might have been a grocer's assistant, and how he had ever been elected sheriff Dan couldn't imagine. He was so obviously a weakling. At least, that was Dan's summary of him.

"You'd best tend to them fellers," said the sheriff to his deputies, indicating the three wounded men, who had now got upon their feet, but were swaying helplessly in the middle of the road. "Git some more help, and take them to the hospital."

"Well, I suppose we're going home

now, aren't we?" Belle Easton demanded of her husband.

"Now listen, honey, don't be sore," Easton began. But, as she turned away with a shrug of her shoulders, he mounted the horse that one of his gunmen had brought up. One of the battered guards offered Belle her stirrup. She twisted it out of his hand, set her foot in it, and sprang into the saddle. In another moment the Circle I group were galloping down the road, but not before Belle had flashed back another dazzling smile at Dan, still standing in the street.

Bunce's hand fell on Dan's shoulder. "Stranger in town, huh? Where you stayin'?" he asked. "When did you arrive? Your name? You see, we check up on strangers in Tomahawk," he explained, when Dan had answered. "I'll see you in my office for a few minutes, Matthews," he said.

With a slight shrug of his shoulders, Dan accompanied the man. His head was aching badly, but his vision was clear again. Dan was pretty sure he wasn't being looked for in Tomahawk, not yet, anyway. Probably it was surmised that he had died in the desert, or was lying up on the edge of Newbury, waiting for the chance to sneak away. And anyway, Bunce must have seen those smiles Belle Easton had given him, and Bunce knew which side his bread was buttered. Dan guessed he was safe enough for the present.

By now a yelling, hooting mob was pressing in upon the line of some half-dozen deputies who had arrived upon the scene. In front of the sheriff's office, beside the brick jail, a block away, a man in his late thirties, with an alert, boyish face, and wearing a neat sack suit, was lounging indolently, ignoring the yells, and the fists that were being shaken at him.

"They shot us down like dawgs!" Dan heard an infuriated man shout. "What you goin' to do about it, Judge? What you think we elected you fer?"

"Do? He won't do nothin'. Ain't he sold out to Easton?" answered another. "Ain't he in Easton's pocket, nibblin' crumbs, like a tame rat? Damn you, Judge Price, you crooked shyster!"

The lawyer smiled, unperturbed. "What are you boys expecting me to do?" he inquired.

"Do? Git after that damn crook and murderer, Easton!"

"But you started the shindy tonight," Price said reasonably.

A volley of curses answered him. "You're smart. You kin always think up an out, can't you!" jeered one of the crowd.

"I was asking you what you expected me to do." Judge Price's voice grew sterner; the ringing tones had some sort of authority in them that seemed to hush the mob. "Now listen to me," he went on. "You fellows put yourselves in wrong, you damn fools, by attacking Mrs. Easton. However, if there's one man among you ready to swear that he was assaulted, while going peacefully about his business, or who saw anybody else assaulted, under the same conditions, I'm ready to issue a bench warrant for the arrest of the person he names. Speak up now!"

But the crowd shuffled and mumbled. Nobody was going to take the initiative in that sort of business. Judge Price knew that. Dan grinned. The crowd had put itself in the wrong, and knew it.

"Well?" demanded Price.

Only muttered curses answered him, and he turned to follow Bunce and Dan into the office.

Half of it was filled by the big desk, with an oil lamp burning on it, and there was the usual scattering of papers, but the thing that caught Dan's eyes immediately was the placard on a nail, right opposite the desk. It offered a reward of two thousand dollars for his arrest. True, there was no photograph, but the description was photographic enough, and Dan felt a thrill go down his spine at the sight of it. He'd never see Doreen again. But he'd fight it out here and now.

The placard must have been rushed, for it was still wet from the press, and smeared with printer's ink. "Escaped the posse," Dan read mechanically. "May have managed to reach Tomahawk, or some other town across the range. Worked on the Broken Bar, belonging to the late Edwin Harlowe. Will probably look for employment on a ranch. Light brown hair, straight nose, pale blue eyes. A dangerous killer. Take no chances with him."

Dan turned his gaze away from the placard, to see that Bunce and Price were watching his face. Maybe Bunce wasn't such a fool and a weakling after all, Dan thought. Dan tried not to show his apprehension, tried to keep his fingers from his belt, toward which some irresistible force seemed to be drawing them. It was their move next, Dan kept thinking.

"Which way did you ride in, Matthews, through the Tomahawks?" inquired Bunce suavely. "You sure look like you must have struck that desert trail, judgin' from the amount of alkali you're carryin'. Rough ridin', I'd call it. And lookin' fer a job here, huh?"

Dan was aware of a faint smile on Price's face. It was the look of a cross-examining lawyer when his victim is beginning to writhe. But the sheriff's face was as innocent as a new-born baby's, almost lugubrious, with the big eyes and slightly pendulous upper lip.

Didn't they know? Surely they must at least suspect. Why, they had both watched him read the "Wanted" notice. They couldn't both be fools. What game were they playing then? Why hadn't Bunce taken his gun away in the beginning, the ordinary method of procedure, when Dan was groggy on his feet?

"Just rode up from the Border," Dan lied.

"Well, we ain't got no objections to law-respectin' strangers, which I take it you're one," continued Bunce. "And we got some nice folks in town. We're shore glad to welcome you."

They knew who he was. Of course they knew. Why, Bunce could have asked him any number of questions that would have put him instantly on the defensive, and tangled him up with lies. They were playing with him. But they were playing with death! Did they *want* him to draw so they could kill him and have a reasonable explanation for Belle—and the reward?

Dan's hands hung at his sides. Unconsciously he was assuming a slight stooping posture, the preliminary to the crouch of death. He was waiting every instant for that blast of lead, and the slow-ticking clock on the sheriff's desk seemed to be spelling out the march of the few remaining seconds of his life.

Well, why didn't they draw? Maybe the baby-faced sheriff was a demon on the draw. Maybe Dan was already covered from outside the window. "A dangerous killer. Take no chances!" The words sang in his head.

"Didn't meet up with nobody on the way through the Tomahawks, I s'pose?" queried Bunce, raising his fat, child-like face. "Thar's a rustlin' gang thar. I'll have to git after them some time. But it's difficult country. You was lucky. Well, Matthews, I just wanted to check up on you, that was all. Mrs. Easton offered you a job with the Circle I, didn't she?"

"Yeah. That outfit looked kind of tough to me, though," Dan parried.

"I'd take it, Matthews. You'll kind of git in touch with local conditions, and, besides, there ain't no other cow-punchin' job hereabouts. The Circle I is the only outfit that hires hands, and you look like you could hold your own. Yeah, I'd take it, wouldn't you, Judge?"

"If I was you, I'd certainly take it, Matthews," said Judge Price. "And I'd take the chance to get acquainted with punching methods this side of the range. They're a little different from along the Border, I understand."

"All right, then. Glad to have met you, Matthews," said Sheriff Bunce, extending a large, flabby hand.

Dan took it, waiting for the sudden trick. He could draw pretty quick with his left, but he was certain that the next instant he would be covered, if not plugged.

But there was no trick at all. It hadn't been necessary for him to drop the sheriff's hand so quickly. But again there was a flicker of amusement in Price's eyes, as if he was enjoying himself.

Moving toward the door, incredulous, suddenly Dan found that he was outside in the street—and free! And, shaken more than if he had just emerged from a fight with Sheriff Bunce and all his deputies.

He walked back toward the hotel. "What the hell!" he muttered. Hadn't they suspected? Yes, they suspected him, and were playing some game with him that would be disclosed later. Belle Easton's interest in him, maybe!

Dan found the hotel entrance and stumbled upstairs.

CHAPTER VII

A Tough Outfit

EVEN at a smart lope, it was more than an hour's ride out to the Circle I ranch house. On the way, Dan made a detour off the road, in order to pass near one of the nesters' shacks, and noticed that the range all about it was overgrown with scrubby mesquite. He saw the thin longhorns, and the muddy pool, fed by a small trickle of water. A lean, gaunt man, standing beside a small, sagging corral, scowled at Dan as he rode by, and Dan fancied that he had been one of the crowd in Tomahawk. The shack itself seemed falling to pieces. And there were other shacks, strung out along the base of the hills, and, seen at a distance, their condition appeared equally dilapidated.

If Easton was bent on getting these nesters out of the district, it could only be ascribed to that peculiar mania of land-greed that characterizes the land-hog. For, beyond the trickling stream, which appeared to mark the boundary of the Circle I, were fat Herefords aplenty, cropping the lush grass.

The Circle I ranch house suddenly sprang into sight. Even in the bright noon sunshine, it somehow appeared furtive and sinister, a long black hulk squatting not far from the base of the mountains, which loomed up dark behind it, their jagged peaks veiled with threatening storm-clouds.

Drawing nearer, Dan saw that everything was in first-class trim. There were three bunkhouses, and a square cook-house, with a tuft of smoke exuding from the chimney. There were sheds, some of them erected recently, for some of the slabs and boards still remained piled about them. Evidently the Circle I employed a good many hands.

In a big corral, a score of horses nibbled at their hay. In another, some fifty lappies, weaned calves, stood disconsolately, echoing back an occasional bawl that came from the long cow shed. Another bunch of calves stood in the branding corral, while, by himself, a bull, ringed through the nose, stood tied to a stout post, switching the flies from his flanks and surveying his surroundings with supreme disdain. In front of the ranch house a fine blooded mare was standing.

Dan dismounted. Five punchers, idling in front of one of the bunkhouses, stared at him as he passed. One of them said something that he didn't hear, and a guffaw followed.

"Hey, Collins!" one of them called, looking inside the bunkhouse. "Here's one of them nesters fer you!"

A squeaky bellow followed, and a hugely built man came out, and made toward Dan. He was the ugliest specimen Dan had ever seen. He had expug stamped all over his countenance. His nose was almost flattened into his face, and one ear was horribly cauliflowered.

Collins wasted no time in preliminary palaver. He charged with flailing

arms, and fists like hams. Dan ducked a wild swing that all but threw Collins, who was very much the worse for drink, off his balance. When the man had recovered his stance, Dan was looking at him, as if mildly interested. Roars of laughter greeted Collins's look of bewilderment.

He rushed in again to finish off the supposed nester. Dan swung his head, to avoid the vicious jab that passed his ear. Collins's shoulder jammed Dan's, hard, and found an immovable obstruction, while the spent force of the missed blow whirled the big man half-way around.

More laughter. The punchers were closing in to enjoy the fun. Collins squeaked profanity, and now he came on professionally, watching Dan carefully through drink-bleared eyes, ready to anticipate his next movement to avoid him. But he didn't succeed. The watchers saw Dan's left sink suddenly into the pit of Collins's stomach, and, as the man doubled forward, and the hideous face sagged, Dan let the ex-pug have it on the chin with his right.

The sound of that terrific smack came echoing back from the wall of the house. Collins lay flat upon his back, staring up at the sun with glassy eyes. Collins was out, cold.

"By Gawd, he's knocked out Collins!"

"He ain't one of them nesters!"

"Whatinhell then?"

A tallish, trim-looking man came out of the ranch house. He was black-haired and wore a small black mustache. His silk shirt, open in front, revealed a muscular chest, and he was wearing dandified riding breeches and high boots. Dan recognized him as the leader of Easton's punchers the night before.

The man strode forward, stared at the still prostrate figure of Collins, stared at Dan.

"You're the hombre who butted in last night!" he exclaimed.

"Correct," admitted Dan.

"Well, just what d'you think you're doin', fellow? You've got your nerve, likewise a punch, I'll hand you that. But you can't play them games here."

"Speakin' frank," said Dan, "I ain't much of a hand for games. Nor I don't like unfriendliness, like I got from Collins here. Mrs. Easton offered me a job. I've come for it."

The other broke into a malicious snicker. "Say, listen, if everybody she offered a job was to git one, where would the Circle I be?" he asked. "Her heart's too big for her pocket. Ride away, cowboy, we got a full house here."

"I'll see Mrs. Easton first."

"Why, you ——!" The other took a step forward, fists clenched, then glanced down at Collins, who was beginning to stir and whimper. "Listen," he said, "what I say goes here."

"What is it?" called a feminine voice from the porch. Belle Easton was standing there. Her frock was black and scarlet, cut to reveal what was undeniably a perfect figure.

"What's the matter with Collins?" she demanded.

"Collins took the count, ma'am, in the first round," said one of the punchers.

Belle Easton came forward. "Why, this is the man who protected me against that crowd of toughs last night!" she exclaimed. "How are you feeling today, Mr.—?"

"Matthews is the name, ma'am. I'm sure sorry I had a little run-in with Mr. Collins here, but—"

"I guess he got what was coming to him," laughed Belle, flashing her dark eyes at Dan.

"This feller allows you promised him a job," said the foreman sullenly. "I was tellin' him we got more hands than we kin use now."

"You take him on, Barber. I can use him."

"Now listen, Mis' Easton—"

"Take him on, I tell you! Did you hear me?" she snapped.

"Well, I s'pose you're the boss," Barber commented. "Matthews, you can put your horse in the corral."

Belle Easton's eyes flashed invitingly at Dan as he passed her with Blaze. Looking back from the corral, Dan saw her engaged in a vigorous argument with Barber. Big Collins staggered to his feet, and, supported by two of his pals, weaved his way back toward the nearest bunkhouse.

"You can take a bunk in there," said Barber to Dan, pointing to the same structure.

Dan found one of three unused bunks, near the door, and, having deposited his few possessions, rolled himself a smoke and began taking stock. There was a space at the end of the room, containing a table and chairs, and two or three packs of cards were lying about in disorder, but most of the used bunks were occupied by men, either sleeping or smoking listlessly.

An ancient cook appeared in front of the cook-house and hammered a gong. Dan joined the rest.

Barber sat at the head of the table. The talk was infrequent and spasmodic, and the round dozen or so who sat down appeared half-drunk or tired out. Their attitude toward Dan was furtive and suspicious.

When they had wolfed down their food, they straggled one by one into their respective bunkhouses. Dan was just going to arise when he heard a moan of pain coming from one of the bunkhouses.

Barber looked at him. "Sick hombre," he explained.

Passing out through the bunkhouse that had been assigned to him, Dan saw big Collins sitting up in his bunk. Dan's single punch had split the man's lip, his face was plastered with dried blood, and his countenance looked still more bestial. Collins stared at Dan in a sort of wonder as he went by.

A little later Barber came up to Dan. "I'm goin' to give you a line-ridin' job, Matthews," he said. "You'll take the day shift, startin' at sunup tomorrer. You'll ride the north side of the range. Boundary follows the brook up to where we've dammed her, then there's a line fence runnin' four or five miles back into the mesquite.

"Them nesters have been cuttin' it, and our steers have been strayin' off into the scrub. If you catch them playin' any tricks, don't hesitate to shoot. We got to put the fear of Gawd into them, to keep them in their place. I take it you're as good with your six-gun as you are with your mitts, Matthews?"

He looked curiously at Dan. "We don't inquire into a hombre's references here," he said. "But we expect service. We're a tough outfit, got to be. The pay's sixty, and, if you make good—" He broke off. "I'm the kingpin here, Matthews," he said, "and don't git any other ideas into your head; then we'll have no trouble."

Dan loafed that afternoon. At intervals he could hear the moans of the sick man in the bunkhouse. Toward sundown the day crew came trooping in, on weary horses. They looked just as tough as those in the bunkhouse. Mex or half-Mex, most of them, typical Border scum that no self-respecting ranchman would have hired. They jerked their hulls off their horses and reeled into the bunkhouses, exhaling fumes of cheap whiskey.

The gong clanged again, and Dan went into the cook-house. The tables were crowded now. Again he was struck by the silence. There was none of the good-natured horse-play prevalent at the ordinary bunkhouse. No good-natured raillery. Mutterings, whispers, scowls directed at him. A little wholesome fear, inspired, Dan thought, by his fight with Collins. He hurried through his meal, then passed out and sat on the bunkhouse steps, smoking one quirly after another.

Suddenly a puncher came hurrying out to another, who was lounging beside the corral. "Bill, Joe's dead!" Dan heard him say.

There was scurrying and confusion inside the bunkhouses. Dan followed the crowd, and stood among them about the bunk on which the dead man lay.

And Dan recognized the man immediately. He was the third outlaw who had escaped on his horse after Dan had killed his two pals—one of the murderers of Doreen's dad, after the fight in the fairway, and it was, of course, Dan's slug in the belly that had killed him. Vicious-looking, leering even in death, he lay back on his pillow.

Dan sat a long time on the bunkhouse steps, until all the lights had gone out. The dead outlaw had already been buried, quietly, unostentatiously, a little distance away.

Dan was trying to turn it all over in his mind. Had the dead man and his companions engaged in a little private murder on their own? Or was Barber—were the others at the Circle I—implicated? One thing was sure, the Circle I was the toughest outfit Dan had encountered yet. He wondered again why Bunce and Judge Price had advised him to take the job.

Much later, lying in his bunk, he heard horses being saddled, then ridden off into the night. But he knew that crew wasn't being sent to night-herd the placid Herefords, which had roamed unattended for several hours since the day crew came in. Three or four men would have been enough.

Dan lay awake for a long time, mulling it all over, till the image of Doreen blotted out everything else.

CHAPTER VIII

"Much More Than That!"

FOR THREE days Dan rode line along the north range. He had a twelve-hour day, but he had plenty of leisure time, and there were no sign of nesters. He inspected the dammed stream. Great rocks had been excavated by dynamite, forcing the volume of water into another channel that forked away to irrigate the Circle I. The line fence ran through country gradually more and more overgrown with mesquite.

Dan, curious to explore the country, rode beyond the limits, where the fence turned sharply eastward, and suddenly discovered that he had hit upon the route by which Doreen and he had entered Tomahawk.

He could see the faint marks of the trail they had made, and then suddenly he came upon the old shack that he and Doreen had noticed under the crag of rock. Whiskey bottles, strewn about it, seemed to indicate that it was still used as a hangout by persons who had need of secrecy. Dan didn't remember having noticed those bottles before.

Dan had already come to the conclusion that Barber wanted him out of the way. He was convinced of it on the second morning, when, riding toward the mesquite, he heard the faint, distant bawl of driven cattle somewhere on the hills.

And yet, if the Circle I was the only ranch in the vicinity, how could it be rustling its own steers?

Easton was away, and Dan, satisfied that he was not being followed, decided to take the third day off and go to the orphanage. Doreen hadn't been out of his thoughts for a moment since he had left her.

He made a wide detour into the town, hitched Blaze in front of the orphanage, and went in. The girl admitted him, but it seemed a long time before the folding-doors opened and Miss Marsh came in, cool, self-possessed as before.

"Well, Dan Gerry?" she asked.

There was a coldness in her manner that hadn't been there before. Dan, hurt by it, blurted out, "I guess you know why I've come. How's Miss Doreen?"

"She remembers everything."

"Say, isn't that great!" cried Dan enthusiastically. "And what are we goin' to do? What are you advisin', Miss Marsh?"

"They had all but reached the end of their journey when Mr. McImray was murdered, Doreen's father. I may as well tell you—I suppose you've got the right to know—Mr. McImray was a Highlander from Lewis. He had a ranch in Nebraska that was destroyed by flood. Doreen's mother had a brother who wanted her father and herself to join him. Doreen's father was to become his heir. He was poor old Mr. Haddon—"

"Of the Circle I!"

Miss Marsh's assent was not an enthusiastic one.

"Unfortunately Mr. Haddon married about two months before his death. In this State, a marriage invalidates a will. So the journey was for nothing, and Mr. McImray met his death at the hands of some of those outlaws in the Tomahawks. He must have lost the trail, or he'd never have taken such a route."

Suddenly Dan felt he knew everything. McImray's murder, which Miss Marsh supposed to have been the work of casual outlaws, had been planned by Easton. Then there must have been a will made after the marriage—a will leaving property to Doreen of such substance that it had been worth while to send the three desperadoes on their mission to kill both the girl and her father.

Dan was about to tell that to Miss Marsh; he checked himself at her next words:

"Doreen and I have been talking over the future. Since she has no inheritance, she is going to remain at the orphanage and teach for a while. And we have talked about you, Mr. Gerry."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Doreen feels grateful to you for having saved her. If there was any way in which she could repay you, she would. But she has gone through a great shock and strain. Her life must be a quiet one for some time to come. We are both agreed that this two-days' acquaintance of yours had better end."

"Meanin' I'm not wanted any more?"

Miss Marsh bowed her head in assent. Dan was glad he hadn't told her now. He'd work like a lone wolf now till he had solved the mystery.

"Maybe you'll let me see her, even if it's good-by?" he asked.

"I'll bring her in to you."

Was it a minute or an hour he waited? Doreen was coming into the room, fair hair smoothed back, her big, gray eyes with their black rims no longer vacant. A little black-clad figure, that came up to Dan and stopped, and looked up at him with wistful, trembling lips.

"Is it true what Miss Marsh was sayin'—you don't want to see me again?" Dan asked.

"I only remember you like someone in a dream—someone who saved me from death. I'll never cease to be grateful. My father's body—?"

"I buried him, Miss Doreen. I thought that was best."

"I suppose so. I try not to think of things. I'm fairly happy here. I want to live quietly here."

"And you don't want to see me, never?"

"What good—oh, what good would it do?" she pleaded. "You're like a stranger to me. I've got to forget, I tell you, I've got to forget. Judge Price says—"

Dan checked the involuntary exclamation on his lips.

"He agrees with Miss Marsh, I oughtn't to see you. Not for a long time, not till I've forgotten."

She was almost touching him, her face upturned to his, her hands clasped in front of her. She placed them on his sleeves.

"Don't think I'm ungrateful. They know what's best for me. Some day, perhaps. . . ."

"Doreen!" The cry broke involuntarily from Dan's throat. And suddenly she was in his arms, her lips responding to the pressure of his, and Dan had grown eloquent; he was saying things that he had never dreamed he could say before.

"I love you, and you love me. I can see it. And I'm not goin' to let you go. You're alone and I'm alone. You and me, ridin' the trail together, Doreen, darlin'. Remember what you said about that cabin, livin' there with somebody you loved? I'd wait for you for years, Doreen, if I could know you were waitin' for me. I could get me a job and be roddin' a little spread of my own inside two, three years. Tell me you love me enough to wait!"

"Oh, Dan, much more, much more than that!" she whispered. "Till I saw you, I tried to make myself believe that they were wise and right. You seemed like a figure in a dream, but now I know that dream was reality. I'll go with you to the world's end any time you call me, Dan."

"God bless you! I always knew I'd meet you some day, darlin'. And I'll never stop workin' for that spread of ours. I'm goin' now, but I'm goin' with hope in my heart instead of blackness, knowin' you'll come when I send for you."

He swept her into his arms again, and their lips clung together. Then, at the sound of Miss Marsh's discreet footsteps outside the door, Dan released her.

"Say nothin'!" he warned her.

He saw the quick glance that Miss Marsh gave Doreen, and wondered how much she had guessed. But he was laughing in his heart when he left the orphanage and went back to his horse.

There were a number of horses tethered on the opposite side of the street, and one of them, a brown with curious markings of white upon the rumps, looked like a horse Dan had seen in the Circle I corral.

Then a new thought came to his mind. Judge Price had been at the back of Miss Marsh's decision that he was not to see Doreen again. And Dan was going to have it out with the judge.

He figured that he was risking nothing. If Price suspected that he was the man wanted for the killing of Powell, and had held his hand, he would still hold his hand. And Dan wasn't going to leave Tomahawk until he had traced the connection between Easton and the murderers of old McImray.

He found the judge's house, a pleasant bungalow on the outskirts. There was nothing sinister about the rosy-faced young woman who opened the door—evidently Price's sister.

"The judge is in his office; I'll tell him you're here," she said, and Dan gave her his name—Matthews.

In another moment or two the door at the end of the hall had opened, and Price was standing in the entrance.

"Come in, Matthews!" he called heartily. "Glad to see you. Well, how are you making out with Easton? Maybe I ought to say Mrs. Easton," he laughed. "She wears the pants in that family."

The little room was lined with books. The desk was piled with papers. Judge Price, straddling a chair, looked like any young fellow ten years out of law school. It was hard to believe he was a tool of Easton's, had sold his soul for whatever pickings Easton threw to him.

"Sit down, Matthews."

"I guess I won't. Ain't goin' to keep you long. I guess you know it was me saved Miss Doreen—Miss McImray—from those outlaws in the Tomahawks, after they'd killed her father."

Judge Price chuckled. "I've been wondering how many of them you killed, Matthews," he answered. "You look like a fellow with a quick trigger finger."

"Killed two, and wounded the third. He just died at the Circle I. I dunno just what the connection is between Easton's crowd and those outlaws. Miss Marsh says Miss Doreen's got nothin' comin' to her. Is that so?"

"That appears to be the case, Matthews."

"Then why did Easton and his gang plan to kill her?"

"Steady, Matthews. Never make insinuations till you're sure of your

ground. It's like this, Matthews. When I go rat-hunting, Matthews—and I'm not speaking of house-rats—I don't send my terrier into what I *think* is the hole. I stop up all holes but one. And then, Dan Matthews, I get my rat."

He smiled. "I'm glad you came to tell me about that affair," he said. "Any other subject on which you want to unburden your mind—in confidence?"

He knew! Of course he knew. And was thoroughly enjoying that knowledge that Dan was a wanted man.

"I didn't come here to unburden my mind," said Dan. "I came to find out what that connection is. Also wonderin' why you told Miss Marsh I wasn't to see Doreen again."

"I'll answer that. Miss Marsh asked my advice, and I recommended that the girl's mind should not be disturbed."

"You think I'd do that?" Dan demanded hotly.

"I don't know you well enough to answer that, and I never guess," returned Price. He shook his finger. "Matthews, remember what I told you about hunting rats," he said. "If you're aiming to link up anybody with that murder, get your evidence, and I'll act. Maybe you're wondering at certain things. I'll be franker with you. I'd like to clean up the gang in this country as much as you would, but I have no intention of acting prematurely. You can help me if you'll keep your eyes open on the Circle I, and find why their stock's diminishing, and where it's going. Do we understand each other?"

"I'm beginnin' to."

"I'm going to need you, my friend, maybe to help catch one of the biggest rats in the State. And if ever you need me, send me word. But go carefully."

"Supposin' they try to get Doreen again?"

"She'll be safe at the orphanage. Good afternoon, Matthews. Remember the rats."

CHAPTER IX

An Offer of Partnership

TWO MORE days had gone by. Easton was still away, and Dan had seen Belle Easton only once, when she smiled and waved to him from the house. He had spent some time investigating the lay of the land beyond the shack, up through the trail. Cattle had been passing that way constantly of late. Why should the Circle I be running off its own steers, along what Dan was convinced was a secret trail to the Border?

Dan had never seen the brand marks on the steers that had appeared at the Broken Bar at Newbury. Powell had kept him away from them. But Dan had known that a mysterious traffic was being carried on.

He had been trying to put two and two together. For one thing, the faces at the Circle I were constantly changing, as if men were being sent away on long journeys or returning from them.

Again, a herd of at least two hundred steers must have passed along that trail within the past two or three days.

Easton was running off his own steers. Then the Circle I didn't belong to Easton! He was running off the steers of the real owner!

Dan was seated on his horse, not far from the old shack, pondering, when a sudden instinct made him swerve. Lurking in the scrub, not more than fifty feet from him, he saw a man's face framed by a hat. Lower down the hill came the crunch, crunch of a horse grazing.

Dan dropped upon one knee. "You can come out, buddy," he called. "But come out with hands up. I'm pesky irritable this mornin'."

He more than expected to feel the wind of a slug, but, instead, a voice shouted:

"Hold 'er! I ain't gunnin' fer you, Dan Matthews."

Dan knew that squeaky voice, even before he saw the villainous face as the man came forward, hands in air. It was big Collins.

"I wanted to talk to you, Matthews," said the big man. "I'm layin' my gun on this here rock. You kin frisk me fer more, which I ain't got."

"Fair enough," said Dan.

Big Collins seated himself upon a rock beneath a pine. "I been thinkin', Dan," he said. "Thinkin' a lot since you give me that knockout. Gawd, that was clean. It was what I call sweet, Dan."

"Glad you take it that way."

"You could make a pile of money in the ring. Me, I'm gittin' old. I ain't what I used to be. Naw, I ain't bore no malice. You and me oughter be pardners, Dan. I've been thinkin' it over since that afternoon, you bein' a dick. Bet you're jest as quick on the trigger as with your fists."

"So you think I'm a dick? Who sent you here?"

Big Collins grinned. "Barber," he answered. "He's been havin' you trailed ever since you came. Different feller each day. Listen, Dan, how would you like to make a clean-up?"

Dan grinned. "That's been my aim all my life."

"Maybe you got your chance now. You're here to keep tab on the Circle I, and why it's runnin' off its own steers, ain't you? Maybe you know? I got an idea Belle Easton ain't the rightful owner of the Circle I. What you think?"

"Maybe. But go on talkin' instead of questionin'."

"I'll talk. That's what I come here fer. Barber thinks I'm too dumb not to foller his orders. Him and Belle Easton have been havin' a big run-in over you. She's been his sweetie, and he's as jealous as hell. And scared of you too. He guessed you was a dick right away, because you must have rode in through the Tomahawks, from the alkali on your hawss. And that means it must have been you who killed Joe and them two other hombres. Joe rode home with his insides ripped out from your slug.

"The fellers was talkin' over various ways of croakin' you last night, but Barber said fer them to lay low and not let you suspect they was wise to you. He's waitin' for a feller to identify you and make sure who you are, first. Which feller is expected tonight."

"How come you're warnin' me of this?" asked Dan.

"Because you and me oughter be pardners. You got what I ain't got, which is brains, but I got some information to throw into the kitty. They think I'm too dumb to do nothin' but draw my sixty per, and a few bucks now and again fer a rake-off, while Barber and some other fellers are bleedin' the Eastons white. I'm not gettin' my share, and I'm not goin' to keep on bein' a sucker for Barber. Barber and his friends are strippin' the ranch, even away from the Eastons. Hell, Dan, why should you work fer a dick's wages when we got our chance tomorrer night. They're aimin' to run off near to four hundred steers."

"Meanin' you and me's to tangle with half the Circle I bunch and take the steers ourselves?" asked Dan.

Collins didn't answer, but produced two blood-stained letters from his inner pocket. "Read them," he said. "I got them offen Joe, before Barber and the other fellers got to him."

Dan opened the creased sheets, stained brown with splashes of blood from the body of the dead crook. They were both addressed to Doreen's father. The first, which was from Judge Price, ran:

"With reference to your letter of the 16 ult., I have already informed you that the will of your brother-in-law, the late Mr. Angus Haddon, was nullified by his subsequent marriage. Under strict interpretation of the law, this does not entitle you to any share in the estate. Nevertheless, there might be certain equities accruing to you which

might make it worth your while to undertake the journey here.

"I should prefer to go into this matter in person, rather than by letter, and shall look forward with pleasure to your arrival."

Dan read the letter, folded it up without comment, and read the second. It was a scrawl from Town Marshal Snell. Apparently old McImray had written to him for directions as to the route to Tomahawk across the desert. Snell, in his reply, had asked old McImray to wire him when he reached a certain town some twenty miles away, and promised to send a deputy to direct him. Dan could see what had happened. Snell had warned Barber to gun them.

Dan flung the letters down at Collins's feet, and shouted, red with rage: "So it was Snell! Ever hear of Snell? Yeah? Snell directed old McImray through the Tomahawks instead of over the State road, so that he should be murdered. Tried to murder his daughter too!"

Dan didn't often swear, but a volley of curses broke from his lips as he saw the plot. He had thought, in reaching Tomahawk, that he had put the past behind him, but it had followed him!

"Well? What do you make of these?" he demanded of Collins.

"I dunno what they say. I—I can't read, Dan, and Joe was too sick to tell me."

Dan hesitated only a moment. He realized he might as well commit himself now. It wasn't likely Collins was double-crossing him, not after handing him those letters.

"This here's from Judge Price," he said. "Price wrote to old McImray—that was the murdered man—telling him to come on to Tomahawk, as there might be certain rights for him in the Circle I."

"So that's why Easton's runnin' off his steers! You think old Haddon made another will after his marriage?"

"Can't say. If he had, Judge Price would have acted. Do you think Price is a crook?"

Collins reflected. "Some say he's sold out to Easton, and others that he's waitin' to git Easton," he answered. "I dunno, Dan. But here's what I been waitin' to say to you. Will you go pardners with me?"

"How do you mean? Blackmailin' Easton or tanglin' with his whole bunch of rustlers tonight?"

"Now listen, Dan. I got another pard. Feller you don't know, from another town. They been playin' him fer a sucker fer months, promisin' him his share of the rake-off, and gittin' him stewed instead. He can tell somethin'. But he's cagy. I met up with him in town last night. He came here to see Easton and got skeered. He said he's got enough dynamite packed to blow the whole damn works. Feller named Pete Welsh."

"What? The little drunkard from Newbury?"

"He's hidin' in town, scared to show his face. But he's goin' to meet me at the old shack below the pass tomorrer night at twelve. Dunno as I trust him too far. But you and me can clean up. Be at the old shack tomorrer night at twelve. I'll have a coupla bottles of hooch, and I think Pete will spill everything. When we know what he knows, we can make some real plans."

Dan considered quickly. This might be a chance to get important information.

"I'll come to the shack," he said. "I ain't aimin' to join any blackmailin' scheme. But I'll do my damnedest to find out how I can link up Easton with McImray's murder."

"Oh, sure," grinned Collins. "Everybody knows you're sweet on McImray's girl. Paid her a visit to the orphanage two days ago, didn't you? Well, pardner, when Pete Welsh spills the beans, I guess you'll jine up with me. And watch your step. Barber's expectin' that friend of his I told you about to

turn up and identify you tonight. And if he identifies you as a dick, hell's goin' to pop."

CHAPTER X

The Lid Blows Off

DAN GERRY spent an uneasy night, in consequence of Collins's warning, but nothing happened. At dawn he was in the saddle, riding toward the north range again.

The reading of those two letters had made him feel that he was involved in a huge conspiracy. And it was Price's attitude that perplexed him most. If a new will existed, leaving the Circle I to Doreen, why hadn't the judge come forward with it? He wavered constantly from one opinion to another concerning Price. In the end, Dan realized that he must wait until the meeting that night with Collins and Pete Welsh.

Riding back that evening, he encountered Belle Easton standing at the side of the ranch house. At her wave, he reined in Blaze.

"Hello, cowboy!" she greeted him. "I haven't seen much of you since you arrived. Where have you been hiding up?"

"Line-ridin', Mis' Easton," said Dan.

"So that's what Barber's doing with you, is it?" She came nearer, glancing quickly right and left. The scent of expensive perfume came to Dan's nostrils. She was pretty—oh, yes, as pretty as her sort came. Dan might have been tempted to fall for her in spite of Easton if the thought of Doreen hadn't come to him like a clean, sharp wind, blowing away all the false glamor of her.

She moved closer to him, lithe, insinuating, like heady wine—only he'd seen the same thing a score of times in dance-halls. "Dan, do you think you could like me?" she asked. "Like me a lot, if I was nice to you?"

Her lips were tantalizingly close, but Dan realized of a sudden that there was something deeper than love-making. Her words had seemed more a cry than a question.

"Dan, I'm in trouble. Will you do something for me, because I've nobody else whom I can trust?"

"Why, I—I'd sure do what I could," said Dan.

"Will you meet me here tonight at half-past ten—right here, under this cottonwood? The night crew will have gone, and the others will be asleep in the bunkhouses. Will you slip out and meet me, Dan? I've got to speak to you."

There was such intensity in her tones that Dan knew this was no love assignation.

"I'll try to do it, Mis' Easton," he said reluctantly.

"I'll expect you."

She broke off as the trim figure and sardonic face of Barber appeared. The foreman, mounted on a half-broken horse, was bringing the animal to the corral, after exercising it. Quickly Belle Easton disappeared inside the house. Barber checked the horse, and his attitude became rigid—he had seen her with Dan. But he only nodded as Dan led Blaze inside the corral.

Another of those silent meals. Murder in the hearts of the sullen punchers who rubbed elbows with him at the table! But this would be Dan's last night at the Circle I. When all was quiet, he slipped out to the corral, saddled Blaze, and led him behind the barn, where he tied him. Then he went to his bunk.

The punchers were snoring. The so-called night crew had ridden away for the big drive. A little before the radium dial of his wrist-watch showed ten-thirty, Dan slipped from his bunk into the darkness of a starless night.

He didn't like that meeting with Belle Easton. But he'd soon find what she wanted, and then ride to the appointment with Collins. He made his way softly between the bunkhouses. Now he was circling the ranch house,

and nearing the cottonwood. Then he stopped dead in the heart of the blackness. Two men were standing under a window, faintly illumined by a candle somewhere within. And at the window was the shadowy silhouette of a woman —Belle Easton.

Dan recognized Barber's voice.

"I tell you he can't be trusted. I've had him watched. He's a snoopin' dick, and you're a plain fool, Belle, to have fallen for him."

"You're lying, Ned. I haven't fallen for him," came the woman's angry whisper.

"No? Well, we'll skip that part. But all we want to know is whether he's a State dick on our trail, or whether he's a certain feller who we think he is. And we let him last just long enough for Ben Hart to get here. Now that Ben's here, we're goin' to look at Dan in his bunk and make sure."

Ben Hart! Dan felt a sudden tenseness as he recognized the boss of Newbury in the dark shadow at Barber's side. Easton's sinister Newbury henchman—what was his purpose here?

"I don't care who he is, you'll leave Matthews alone," whispered Belle Easton hysterically.

"Yeah, maybe," sneered Ben Hart. "If he's the hombre I think he is, there's a reward of two thousand bucks for him, dead or alive. He's a murderous killer. And if he ain't, he's a nosin' dick."

"If either of you lay a finger on him, I'll see you get the limit of the law," Dan heard Belle whisper.

"I guess not," snickered Barber. "Remember that I could tell Easton things that no husband likes to hear about his wife. Think it over. You've got a purty smart head."

Dan heard Belle moan, almost inarticulately. The two men turned away. Whispers followed.

"Best wait about fifteen minutes. He's a late bird," said Barber. "Then we'll make the job clean and sweet."

"Okey. The other matter's arranged. You can trust Snell. So there'll be some feminine sassiety at the old shack tonight," said Hart.

Dan watched the two pass down toward the corral. He grinned to think that he, the "corpse," was going to surprise them. But he meant to slip away without bloodshed, if possible. Besides, he'd have to warn Collins that the meeting must take place elsewhere, since Hart and Barber and some trollop were evidently going to occupy the old shack that night and maybe Marshal Snell of Newbury, who was obviously in on the deal.

Then he saw Belle Easton approaching the cottonwood.

"Dan, Dan, thank God, you came!" she whispered, placing her hands upon his shoulders. "Dan, you're in great danger. They're planning to kill you in your bunk. You've got to ride at once!"

"Yeah, I overheard that amiable intention," answered Dan. "And, not aimin' to become a human sieve, I had the idea of movin' on."

"Dan," she whispered, "they think you're a detective. They're afraid of you. Who are you?"

"Well, I had some trouble with Ben Hart. You heard him say I was wanted."

"That's who you are? Barber told me he suspected. He was waiting for Hart. Listen, Dan! Would you kill a man for me?"

"Meanin' Barber?"

"No!"

"Easton?"

"That old fool? No!"

"If it's Ben Hart, I might entertain that proposition, if I could give him the chance to draw."

"No, no! It's somebody you don't know, never heard of. Somebody who's been hounding me for years, even while Angus Haddon was alive."

"Who he is?"

"Someone in Newbury. I can't tell you now. You've got to ride at once, before they look for you. Make for the old shack below the pass, and I'll meet you there tonight, later."

"I can't meet you there," Dan began. Everybody seemed to be going to the old shack. "You can't go there," he repeated.

Then Dan saw dark figures swarming down toward the corral, and others circling the bunkhouses.

"I got to go, Belle," he said, and darted off into the darkness.

He was well away in the cottonwoods when his absence was noted by the angry men.

Dan could hear a dozen gun-shots screeching. He raced through the dark toward the barn, behind which Blaze was tied. Thank heaven, his horse hadn't been discovered! While his pursuers yelled among the cottonwoods, Dan was streaking toward the barn, pandemonium behind him, and Belle Easton's screams rising above all.

Dan found Blaze. Cut off by the barn from the sight of the punchers, he paused to charge his cylinder. He still hadn't been seen. And now he was in the saddle. He turned his horse's head toward the hills, and then saw a dozen shadowy shapes emerging, mounted, from the corral.

Dan had two appointments, but he realized that flight in that direction was impossible. He had to choose another direction. He must make the old shack by the roundabout way through Tomahawk.

Sheltered by the barn, Dan bent low in his saddle, and sent his horse streaking toward the town. None of the punchers saw the black shadow that swept through the night, and was lost to view almost upon the instant.

CHAPTER XI

In the Cabin

DAN LET Blaze ease himself down to a steady lope. The road through Tomahawk was a roundabout one to the old shack in the mountains, but it was the only other one available, on account of a rugged spur that ran down the north side of the Circle I. And the thought of Doreen there was in Dan's mind, as always.

After some twenty minutes' riding, Dan saw the lights of the town ahead of him. He slackened his pace still more. If it hadn't been so late, he would have called at the orphange. The memory of Doreen's kisses had come back vividly, to torture him. He wanted her, wanted to take her away with him, to ride the range until they found the spot of their dreams, so that they could live there all their days together. But first he must finish the job that he had undertaken. He must put that memory of her lips out of his mind, and play the part to which he had set himself.

He rode slowly through the town, aiming to turn up the track beside the rocky spur, and reach the cabin. But, as he neared the end of the main street, Dan saw a crowd gathered near the orphanage. He heard their excited shouting. He moved on with another little group of riders who were approaching the same place.

Nearly opposite the orphanage, their progress was blocked by the jam. Men were weaving back and forth, shouting, pressing forward toward the entrance. And there, by the light of a street lamp, Dan saw Miss Marsh, hatless, coatless, declaiming to the crowd.

He was close beside her when the jam closed in about him.

"If you're men, you'll find him! If there's a man among you, he'll ride out to that ranch and bring her home. That girl among those devils! Devils, I say! Don't stand gawping at me! Get Sheriff Bunce and find her! Find her!"

Suddenly she ceased, her jaw dropped as she recognized Dan sitting on his horse.

"You—you— There he is!" she cried.

"You meanin' me, Miss Marsh? What's happened?"

"Where have they taken her, those confederates of yours? You can't pull the wool over my eyes. Take that

man!" she cried, leveling a denouncing arm.

"One minute, Miss Marsh," said Dan, so calmly that the gaping crowd made no hostile movement, "you ain't speakin' of Miss Doreen? You ain't sayin' she's been taken away?" Suddenly the realization set his nerves quivering. "Gawd, who took her?" he cried.

"It was one of your confederates. She dropped the piece of paper you wrote, telling her to meet the man, to slip out of the orphanage."

"I never wrote no paper to her, ma'am."

"You're lying! Seize him! Hold him! I'll make him tell! That poor girl, in the power of those wretches! Get her from the Circle I! Get her—and hold this man!" she screamed.

Dan suddenly took it all in. He remembered that a spy had followed him on his last trip to the orphanage, and now suddenly he understood the significance of Hart's words that night:

"The other matter's arranged. You can trust Snell. There will be some feminine sassiety at the old shack tonight."

God in heaven, he had supposed that some cheap dance-hall girl was to share the company of the pair in some carousal! But Doreen, his little Doreen! He must save her, if it was not too late. And, if it was too late, God help the wretches who had lured her away!

He heard a wild cry break from his lips, and saw the mob scatter as he drove Blaze into their midst, saw hands outstretched to drag him from the saddle, and sent men spinning headlong under the buffets of Blaze's shoulders.

His gun was in his hand, though he didn't know he had drawn it. There was something so frenzied, and yet chill and irresistible in Dan's look, that the boldest shrank from him.

Dan was through them, and turning east across the range. An hour's hard riding should bring him to the old shack. There was only one half-obliterated trail that ran along the edge of the mountain spur.

He'd take those two black dastard souls to the pit of hell with him if anything had befallen Doreen!

The moon suddenly shone out, illuminating the dark range. Dan, looking back, saw a single rider from Tomahawk in pursuit of him. He cursed. He didn't want to have to shoot it out with the fool. He let Blaze out again, and Blaze responded, though he was obviously weakening after the long day's ride. In a minute or two Dan looked back again. The rider was still hard on his trail; not only that, but he had succeeded in decreasing the distance between them.

Two minutes more, and now Dan could hear the drumming of the strange horse's hoofs on the hard ground, and the swish of the mesquite shrubs against its flanks. He reined in, six-gun in hand.

"If you're comin' shootin', O.K., fool!" Dan yelled. "If you've got any sense, pull in. I'll raise my arms."

The approaching rider slowed to a lope, but still came on. "Dan Gerry!" he called. "Dan Gerry, I want you!"

Suddenly a gleam of moonlight shone on the fat, innocent face of Sheriff Bunce. The sight of that baby face infuriated Dan beyond reason. Bunce knew his name, knew he was a wanted killer, and had come after him, far ahead of any posse that might be following him.

Was it courage or simply dumbness? Baby-face Bunce, the tool of Easton, thinking he could arrest him when Doreen's life was at stake! And each second was precious. And the seconds were passing now!

Dan whirled Blaze around. "Damn you, Bunce!" he shouted, sending Blaze crashing into the sheriff's mount.

Bunce was trying to draw. Trying ludicrously to draw. Dan remembered that afterward, though it was all a matter of a split second. Bunce's hand fumbling at his holster—why, he could have been shot a score of times before the gun came out! Bunce's voice, quavering, "I ain't come here to harm

you, Gerry, but you got to listen—"

Crash! Dan's gun dropped on the sheriff's head and sent him spinning from the saddle. Bunce collapsed in the mesquite bushes beside the trail. In an instant Dan was out of his saddle, had caught the sheriff's horse as it was about to bolt, and snarled the reins around a tree. Then Dan bent over the prostrate man.

Sheriff Bunce was lying peacefully upon his back, his round face staring up at the moon. He was totally out. Dan examined his head. Bunce must have been gifted at birth with a skull of unusual thickness, for Dan's blow would have brained most men. But Bunce was just stunned. He'd come to in an hour or two, Dan judged, and in a day or two he would be none the worse. But now the fear that Bunce was the advance guard of a posse sent Dan back into his saddle again. He looked back across the scrub, and could see nobody following, but he wasn't taking any chances. So, leaving the fallen sheriff beside his horse, Dan remounted and rode on again.

He was nearing the mountains now, where a succession of ridges ran at a right angle to the spur along which he had been traveling. Ahead of him he could see the cleft that was the pass. God, if it was too late! Dan's heart was thumping like a mad drummer as he drove Blaze up and up through rugged country. Far away, through the pine-scrub, Dan saw a tiny flicker of light!

Instantly Dan changed into a lurking cougar. His face was a mask of snarling hate. He led Blaze to the side of the trail and fastened him to a jack-pine. Then, with hurried, yet stealthy, steps he moved noiselessly along the trail toward the cabin.

A cry of fear—Doreen's cry—rang through the night! Dan raced at the top of his speed. Only one horse was standing at the cabin door, but a dozen would have made no difference.

"Leave me alone!" Dan heard Doreen pleading. "You told me Dan was sick. Why won't you let me go? If you're a sheriff— Oh, let me alone, I tell you!"

Dan was at the door now. There was only one man in the shack with Doreen. Dan saw his star flash in the light of the single candle upon the table before he recognized the man. Then, paunchy, gray-haired, double-jowled, bestial of face—Town Marshal Snell! He had the girl in his arms, and she was struggling with him.

A cry of fury broke from Dan's lips. Snell turned with an oath. He recognized Dan. And for a moment he stood as if palsied, as if he knew that his fated hour had struck.

For a moment Dan stood looking at him. He saw the half-healed scar between the marshal's eyes. His own gun had done that. He might as well have killed Snell then, as he was going to now.

Marshal Snell looked and knew. He drew with a vile oath, and the two guns roared together. Snell's slug spurted from the rotting boards at Dan's feet. Snell hadn't been able to raise his arm high enough to aim, because death had struck him instantaneously, right in the middle of the scar between his eyes.

The heavy body slumped to the floor. Doreen screamed again, and then came running forward. "Dan! Oh, Dan!" she moaned.

Dan held her tightly in his arms, trying to quell the hysterical sobs that racked her. "Now, now, honey girl, it's all right, it's goin' to be all right," he kept repeating.

"He sent a message to me. A message from you, Dan."

"I never wrote none, darlin'."

"It said that you were sick, and was signed with your name. I was to slip out at once, without telling anybody, and meet him. He showed me his sheriff's star, and said he was taking me to you on his horse. He brought me here, and— Oh, Dan, if you hadn't come!"

"Hush, darlin', hush! He got what he deserved. I'll take you away."

He bent his lips to hers, and, cold

and tremulous though they were, they responded to the ardent kiss he gave her.

"We'll ride right now, as far as we can go. Will you ride the long trail with me?"

"Forever," answered Doreen.

Then suddenly she cried out his name and clutched at him. Dan saw her eyes dilate as she looked over his shoulder. He whirled as a dark form leaped at him from the threshold of the cabin, felt a stunning impact over the ear, and went sinking down into fathomless darkness.

CHAPTER XII

Trapped!

THE LAST sound that Dan heard was Doreen's scream. Aeons afterward, out of the blackness, a little lamp of consciousness began to shine. And, aeons later, Dan became aware that it was he, lying helpless, with a splitting skull.

Suddenly that little light lit up the caverns of consciousness. Dan opened his eyes and looked about him. He was lying in a corner of the shack, roped tightly to two of the uprights. Three men were in the room, two seated, one pacing backward and forward. Doreen was not there.

The three men were Barber, Ben Hart, and Easton. It was Lew Easton who was pacing to and fro, while the two others talked. Dan forced his brain to take in what they were saying.

"You should have come long before, Hart," said Barber. "As things are, this skunk nearly spilled the beans. I don't trust Bunce, nor Judge Price neither. I heard Bunce had a reputation as a killin' sheriff down in Texas somewheres."

"Killin'? Bunce? Haw, haw!" roared Ben Hart. "Why, Bunce couldn't take a rattle from a baby!"

"Maybe, maybe. But how about Price? Easton, you said you never trusted Price. How about him?"

Easton paused in his stride. Seen at close quarters, he looked very different from the spruce, pompous individual whom Dan had seen outside the town hall. He was wearing a neat sack coat and riding breeches, and his linen looked immaculate, but the man's face looked old and shrunken, and the great vulture's beak was a strange, pallid white in contrast to his mottled complexion.

"I trust nobody," said Easton.

"Meanin' us?" demanded Barber belligerently.

"I trust nobody. What's Marshal Snell done with that letter I sent him, askin' him to show old McImray the route into the Tomahawks? We'll never know now, but it'll turn up among his effects. He was planning to blackmail me like everybody else."

"That'll be enough about that, if we're to work together, Easton," snarled Barber. "No callin' names. I guess there ain't a feller in the world who won't take his rake-off if he can get it. That letter don't prove nothin'."

"It's a link in the chain," mumbled Easton. "Enough to hang us all. When I think of old Haddon—!"

"You should have thought harder of Haddon before."

"We were friends once."

"Well? You got him out to the Coast and sicked Belle onto him, knowin' he was old and dotin'. You got what you went after, didn't you? Now you're tryin' to quit. But what did we get?"

Easton raised his face and looked at Barber with such intensity that Barber shifted uneasily in his chair. "I'm not a fool, Barber," he said. "I know about you and Mrs. Easton. I loved her, trusted her—"

"Keep your voice down, or that filly'll hear you," said Barber, glancing back at a door that led into the woodshed of the cabin. "Now listen, Easton. You're all wet, and you ain't got no right to be sayin' such things. You're gettin' like old Haddon was. Mis' Easton's a

fine woman, and if you got any crazy notions about her bein' fond of me or anybody else, you best fergit them. And, speakin' about hangin', I say again, keep your voice down. You're takin' too pessimistic a viewpoint, Easton. Thar's only two weak spots in your alibi, and we got them both here!"

He glanced at Dan, who, fully conscious now, was cautiously investigating his bonds. He felt a heavy knot behind his back. He lay still, feigning unconsciousness. If he could but get free. . . . Doreen in the shed behind . . . if he could get free! The sweat streamed down his face.

"Touchin' on the girl, Alibi Number One, I'm takin' her with me to Mexico on the big drive tonight," said Barber. "Never did approve of the idea of wipin' her out. Specially not since I seen her. Just a little honeymoon trip to a place I know across the Border, and, after I leave her, she won't come back troublin' you, Easton, seein' the pickin's is easy there, and they don't encourage the girls to leave. And, if she did come back, what could she prove? Everybody knows she's been out of her head!

"She's goin' to be my special perquisite," Barber continued. "And as for this dick here, we'll blot him out just as soon as we know whether he's stowed any of old McImray's papers."

"Don't forget," said Hart, "there's a reward of two thousand on his head, dead or alive. Maybe they'll raise it, if we dicker." He spat contemptuously on the dead man, who had been tossed to one side of the shack.

"Yeah, dead or alive, exactly," grinned Barber. "And, if they find Snell's body here, they'll allow Snell shot him, and the reward will go to Snell's estate. We got to git Snell out of the picture. And we got to leave something to identify Gerry. And there's other ways of bumpin' off that dick than shootin', which would raise questions."

"Where's his horse?" snorted Hart. "That'll identify him. Or his hat."

Barber strode to Dan's side, and kicked him hard in the ribs. "Wake up, puncher!"

Dan groaned and feigned to be half-unconscious. Barber kicked him again.

"So you're wakin' up, are you?" he sneered. "Well, Mister Nosy Dick, you was spotted from the first minute you showed up at the Circle I, if that's any grief to you. Likewise, bein' outlawed, I reckon you're in a tough spot. But we're soft-hearted fellers. Maybe we'd fergive and fergit, includin' Snell, who won't be missed, if you tell what you done with them papers of McImray's."

"You can go plumb to hell," answered Dan, speaking with affected weakness.

They leaped at him, kicked him, jumped upon him. Dan felt a spasm of intolerable pain shoot through his side. But Easton interposed.

"That'll be enough," he said. "If he's got any papers, they'll be in his saddle bag, and his horse will run straight back to the ranch."

"Yeah, if it ain't tied too tight."

"I'll have a searching party look for it in the morning. Get on with the business. But no brutality."

"Listen," snarled Hart at Dan. "Here's your last chance. If you take us to your horse and git them papers, we'll let you go."

The possibilities flashed through Dan's head in an instant. But he saw no chance of escape. And he meant to stay as near Doreen as he could till the last moment of his life.

"I told you to go plumb to hell," he gritted through clenched teeth. "And meant it."

At that instant the very faint, distant bawl of driven steers came to his ears. The others heard it too.

"The boys have started the drive," said Barber. "O.K., Mister Dick. But we're goin' to give you a taste of hell before you go there. You'll be beggin' to die."

He drew his sheath-knife from his belt. Again Easton intervened.

"I won't have it," he screamed. "God, haven't I gone through enough? Finish your business, but there'll be no torturing."

Barber swung about and looked at the man through half-closed eyelids. "O.K., boss," he said, with an affectation of humility. "I won't turn your delicate stomach. Let's get the girl, Hart. Let them two sweeties see each other before he croaks."

They were bringing Doreen in. A gag was in her mouth, her hands were bound behind her, and a rope held her knees close. She came in silently, not struggling, Dan thought at first stupefied with fear.

"Look at your sweetie," jeered Barber, putting his arm around her. "He's leavin' this part of the country tonight. You ain't likely to see him again. But I'll git you another."

Then Dan saw that she wasn't afraid. Not afraid of anything, though her tortured eyes were fixed on his, and there was a look of infinite anguish on her face. She was taking it like a thoroughbred! She understood the meaning of Barber's threat, but she was taking it.

"We got to git that out of the way," said Hart, indicating Snell's body.

"Yes! Tie her up opposite the dick, so they can blow kisses to each other."

The two men picked up Snell's body and carried it outside. Meanwhile Dan had been working at his ropes, desperately, but unavailingly. The knot was immovable. He called Easton, who was standing in the doorway.

"I guess you know what you're undertakin', Easton," he said. "Maybe murderin' me don't mean a thing to you. But let Miss Doreen go. Cut her ropes and let her slip away. If there's anything of a man in you—"

Easton swung about, raising his haggard vulture's face from his chest.

"I daren't, I daren't!" he groaned, more to himself than Dan. "They've got me in their power."

Again Dan heard the bawling of the steers, a hundred bovine voices raised in protest. It sounded nearer. The herd must be well on the way.

"Easton," Dan pleaded, his voice tremulous with eagerness, "you said that Haddon was your friend. If you let that happen to her, you'll be haunted by the memory all your life. Never mind about me, but let her go. There's time—there's time—"

There was no time. As Easton raised his haggard, haunted face again, even as he seemed to hesitate, Barber and Hart came back.

"Threw Snell's corpse down into the ravine," said Barber. "Well, they'll never find that hombre. Easton, there wasn't no need to drive them steers at all! I told you so, but you was always so plumb scared—"

He saw Dan's hat on the floor, picked it up, and tossed it far away down the slope. Dan, waiting for what was to come, saw Doreen's tortured eyes fixed upon his. But there was no fear in them, even now. It was good-by, but it was a look of pride in Dan, and a look of dauntless love.

"This dick might be thought to have blowed his brains out, trapped in this shack," suggested Hart.

"Yeah, but fingerprints on guns is risky," announced Barber. "Throw in some bottles. He got so soused, he set the shack on fire, and never waked."

Doreen screamed through her gag as she understood, screamed and struggled. Easton, purple in the face, was mouthing inaudibly, and making motions with his hands. Barber took him by the arm and ran him out of the shack. He came back and picked up the struggling girl. She was mad with fear now. She knew what had been planned, and her courage had broken though Barber had removed her gag and bonds.

She knew, because Hart had already set a lighted candle under the rotting framework beside the door. Already a little coil of smoke was rising, and a little line of fire was running along the bottom of the woodwork.

Barber's and Hart's yells of derision

to Dan were lost in the thunderous bawling of the steers. Then Dan was alone, and making one more desperate effort to free himself.

It wasn't possible. He couldn't even reach the knot, so tightly was he tied. And now the front of the shack was belching smoke, and the interior was full of it. And out of the smoke the fire flared and ran in irregular lines along the base of the shack.

He knew now that he could never untie that knot. He saw Doreen in Barber's power, and he made yet one more furious, futile struggle in vain. The fire was running around the base of the hut. The interior was a mass of swirling smoke, but, flat on the ground, Dan could still breathe.

He fought against his bonds again, cursing the inert, useless muscles that refused to obey his will. He prayed that death might come quickly, that he might never know Doreen's fate. Suddenly he prayed.

It had been years since he had been to church, though he'd lived decently. But there could be no help, unless a miracle supervened. He prayed:

"God, save her! Save her!"

Then suddenly Dan noticed a strange thing. It was the woodwork at the base of the hut that was flaring like tinder, throwing out an almost insufferable heat. Not the walls. Dry-rot and age had made them almost fireproof. The elements of combustion had mostly gone out of them, leaving a worm-riddled, porous mass that crumbled instead of flaring.

But the fire was nearing him, eating its way viciously around the bases of the walls. It was nearing the ropes that bound him to the uprights! It was nibbling at them, charring them. Dan's hair was sizzling, the fierce heat was intolerable, and yet Dan watched with the quiet conviction that his prayer had been answered.

The ropes were blazing. Dan put all his strength into one mighty heave. He was free! The miracle had been wrought.

Fighting off the death-fumes from the smoke, Dan staggered toward the entrance of the hut, gained the open, heard his voice go from him in a wild cry, and slipped down the slope toward the canyon.

CHAPTER XIII

On the Trail

"PARDNER! Pardner!" Dan opened his eyes. He hadn't been out, he told himself, and yet he had been carried some distance, for the shack, now a mass of smoldering tinder, throwing out dense clouds of smoke, was some distance away. He was lying in the scrub beside the trail, and big, ugly Collins and Belle Easton were bending over him. Their horses stood near-by. In the distance sounded the bellows of the steers.

"Met up with Mis' Easton," Collins explained. "Hung around waitin' fer you. Heard them fellers in the shack, and aimed to wait till they'd vamoosed. Didn't know you was inside, Dan. That pard of mine never showed up."

"Doreen!" The name burst from Dan's lips. "They've taken her! Barber's taken her on that drive. I've got to save her."

"I dunno how," said Collins. "Thar's something like fifteen hombres on that drive. Can't fight them alone."

"I've got to save her!"

"Might foller along, keepin' under cover, and watch fer your chance," Collins suggested. "That drive's goin' purty fast."

"It's hopeless, Dan," put in Belle Easton. "Listen, Dan, she's not your type, not the sort of girl a man like you would throw away his life for. I knew about your saving her. So I went to the orphanage with a subscription, so as to see her. Just an innocent, simple little doll you'd get tired of in a week, Dan. Forget her!"

She was sidling up to Dan, and again he caught the scent of that heady per-

fume. Again he was conscious of the allure of her, and again the thought of Doreen blew away all the false glamor of her.

Her arms went around Dan's neck. "Forget her!" she said again. "You'll be riding to your death. Dan, I'm sick of it here. I've run my race. Yes, I've run many races in my time." She laughed hysterically. "But I'm through with Tomahawk. I've got money, Dan—plenty. And I want you!"

She was sobbing on Dan's shoulder. Dan looked into her pretty, tear-stained, painted face, and for the first time he understood. Belle Easton wasn't all bad. No woman was all bad. He'd always had the Western man's viewpoint of women as belonging exclusively to the one class or the other, but now there came to him a glimmering sense of their weaknesses, their temptations, their perplexities.

"Mis' Easton, that can't be," he answered. "I love her!"

"Listen to me, Dan. I'm only a year or two older than you, but I guess I understand you as if I was your own mother. You think you want her now. You'll tire of her. Dan, I've been a fool, and what the world would call a bad woman, but I've never felt this way before."

"Mis' Easton, you got to remember your husband!" Dan said, turning moralist. But what else could he say?

She laughed bitterly. "Dan, I'd take all chances. I'd let you go. I'd let you go to that little doll you think you want. But I can't let you go to your death, Dan. And it would mean death to follow her. She'll fall for Barber quick enough—damn him! Dan, I'm ready to start for the Coast tonight. Come with me, Dan."

"No, Mis' Easton."

Her face flamed as she drew back from him. "Then go to hell!" she raved. "Go to your death! Ride on! Ride out of my life, because I never want to see your face again! Where's your gun, cowboy? Took your belt, did they? Well, here's mine!"

She produced a blue-muzzled forty-five and a box of ammunition.

"I guess I'm on the warpath tonight," she said, with a bitter laugh. "There's just one man who's too vile to cumber the earth any longer. And I was going to shoot him, if he'd shown up tonight. I knew he'd met up with Collins. Collins talks sometimes."

Dan took the weapon, turned it over in his hand. A sweet, nicely balanced sixgun. A man's weapon. Suddenly all his confidence came back to him.

"His name's Pete Welsh—that's what he calls himself now," Belle continued.

Pete Welsh! Dan stared at her in bewilderment. The little, shrivelled man at Newbury, who wore expensive clothes, and was drunk night and day, and always had money to burn. The man of whom big Collins had spoken.

"I meant to kill him, but I don't care now. I'm through with this life, all of it. But, if you meet up with him, kill him for me, and tell him it's because I asked you to. Go and get killed now, trying to save that little fool! Go! What are you waiting for?"

With an outburst of wild, hysterical laughter, Belle Easton turned away. In another moment she had vaulted into the saddle of her horse, and was cantering down the slope in the direction of the Circle I.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Collins. "Dan! Wait! Wait!" He followed him with a blundering rush as Dan raced down the trail to his horse. He caught at Dan's bridle as Dan leaped into his hull. "You can't make it, I tell you!"

But Dan wrenched the reins from him, and urged Blaze forward, up the slope in the direction of the cattle trail. For an instant Collins stood staring after him, then ran back to his own horse, and followed Dan.

Some queer impulse of loyalty had come over big Collins. Perhaps it was admiration for that knockout that Dan had given him. Probably he didn't know himself. Nor did he know what he was going to do. He just trailed

Dan, ready to come to his aid in any emergency.

Dan heard the big man's horse blundering behind him, but he paid no attention to it. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, except to save Doreen from the devils who had taken her away. And, in the moonlight, which had now spread over the country, he sought the cattle trail through the tangled scrub.

He could hear the steers bawling. They couldn't travel fast, not in that country, but they had gone some distance, and were evidently being pushed hard. If only Dan could find that trail!

This way and that, trying to guide himself by the ever lessening sound of the steers, sliding down into canyons, forcing Blaze up almost inaccessible heights, Dan made his way. And ever behind him he heard Collins's horse blundering on his trail.

Dan was growing desperate. The mountains, taking up the echoes of the bawling, diffused them in all directions. The bawling was growing much fainter now. The drive must be well on its way, though it would be at least three nights and days to Mexico.

Then suddenly Dan cried out in exultation as the scrub parted, revealing the cattle trail before him! Weary though Blaze was, Dan set him to that steady lope that would mean a sustained pace, and prove speediest in the end. Dan could hear Collins's horse, clumping along. But all his thoughts were with Doreen.

So long as that bawling lasted, it meant that the beasts were being prodded on, and that Doreen was safe from her captors. If it stopped, that would mean that a camp was being made. . . . Again Dan prayed. Prayed that it would not stop until he had overtaken the gang.

That lope was telling. It was twice as fast as the speed of the rambling herd. On the right, the flat of the desert stretched as far as Dan could see. But ahead of him the fairway ran between two lines of mountains. And now, far ahead, Dan could make out a great black mass that could just be seen to move.

Dan could now faintly hear the cracks of the punchers' sixguns as they urged the beasts along. He'd be in time! His heart exulted. He'd be in time!

Then suddenly a rider emerged from a little trail on Dan's left. So suddenly that the two horses had actually collided before Dan was aware of him. Dan's gun was out of his pocket and in his hand, almost as quickly as a holster draw. But the other man was greased lightning on the draw. Dan saw merely the half-circle of the arm —and then the sixgun was in his face.

"Grab the sky! Quick, puncher!"

Then it was that Dan's overwrought emotions discharged themselves in a peal of helpless laughter. For the hold-up man was Sheriff Bunce. Sheriff Bunce speaking in a tone of command that Dan had never heard him use before. Sheriff Bunce, with a black streak that must be dried blood, plastering one side of his forehead—Dan's own work earlier that evening.

Dan elevated. But Bunce had already recognized his man. An exclamation burst from his lips. And Dan's laughter hadn't been mirth. He swayed toward the sheriff.

"I'm ridin' after that rustlin' gang," he said quickly. "I dunno why they're runnin' off their own steers, but they got Doreen. Tied her up in a shack by the pass. Tried to burn me alive.

"Who's leadin' them?" Bunce snapped. "Snell?"

"Sneel's feedin' coyotes. I killed him before the rest of them jumped me. Barber and Hart, and about fifteen other hombres from the Circle I. Easton, maybe, if he's got guts enough. You've got to help me save her from them, Bunce. You man enough to ride with me, Bunce? And that sound behind, that's Collins, of the Circle I. He'll help, maybe. Three of us. We've got to do it. I sure didn't mean to

hurt you tonight, but I was ridin' for her, and hadn't time to explain."

"You damn fool puncher, I was ridin' after you to tell you I was with you, but you didn't give me time to explain," Bunce snarled. "Hell, I was out half an hour, and I could have plugged you now before you got that gun clear.

"Gerry, I got a posse behind me, and we're after them coyotes' hides. Been on the prowl fer them a long time. Had to git proof. That girl's the proof. And about your killin' Powell, he was outlawed in five States fer murder. You git a reward instead of the noose. That's why I let you go, that's why Judge Price and me sent you to the Circle I to nose around fer us, only your head's thick—well, Gerry, about as thick as mine, I reckon.

"We'll git the girl. Here come my fellers!"

CHAPTER XIV

"I Wanted Easton"

AROUND dozen of Bunce's posse began to emerge out of the scrub. Some looked like nesters, others like small shopkeepers. Dan noticed that each of them wore a large white band about his right arm.

Collins had seen the meeting, and, doubtful of his own status, had departed as silently as possible for parts unknown.

"You need a white armlet," said Bunce to Dan. "Any feller got a spare one?"

"Here y'are," called one of the posse, pulling one out of his pocket and handing it to Dan. "Say, Sheriff, ain't this the hombre we was chasin', who conked you on the bean?"

"Yeah, but that was jest a misunderstandin'," answered Bunce. "He's in with us. Lookin' fer that young lady from the orphanage. Them dawgs have got her with them, and we're goin' to git her. You be careful not to fire at her when you aim at a rider who don't wear a armlet.

"We're goin' to ride right into 'em, fellers. The idea is to stampede them steers straight into the pass ahead, and block it. That will trap them Circle I hounds. And there ain't no other escape out of this valley. Don't spare your ammunition, but don't kill jest fer the fun of it. We want all the witnesses we can git. And *git the girl!*"

He touched his horse with his spurs, and next moment the whole posse was streaming down toward the distant mass of steers. It was evidently Barber's intention to get them through the pass before halting for the night, for the bawling continued unabated, and now it could be seen that the mass of black forms was approaching the pass, where the peaks drew together. The cries of the drivers, and the crack of their sixguns, as they urged on the laggards, began to be more audible.

Then suddenly distant yells indicated that the approach of the posse had been seen. Out of the mass of lumbering steers, Dan began to distinguish the figures of the drivers, falling back to meet the onslaught. The yells became a defiant chorus. A black line of horsemen was forming behind the steers. Dan was racing at the head of the posse when Sheriff Bunce drove his horse beside him, and, standing up in his stirrups, screamed:

"Spread out in line! Pick your men! And give them hell, fellers! No stoppin' till we got them all, dead or alive!"

Nobody who had seen Sheriff Bunce in his office, with his baby face, would have recognized him now in this mechanism of demoniac energy, charging at the head of his men, standing up in his stirrups, yelling, and brandishing his sixgun.

A chorus of defiant yells met them. But suddenly all sound was drowned in the bawling of the frantic steers as they stampeded toward the pass. And, on their heels, rode Dan and Bunce and the posse. Now the sixguns began

to send out flashes of stabbing light. Riders came together, howling like fiends, their voices inaudible, only the contortions of their faces indicating their fury as they fired, slugged, and pulled one another from the saddle.

Men and horses went toppling down. Wounded men, lying in the grass, fired at riders as they streaked past through the night. But so swift and desperate had been the charge of Bunce's men that most of the Circle I drivers were already seeking flight, and jammed up against that lethal mass of milling steers that was crowding into the pass.

"Find her! Find her, boy, and you'll be pensioned off for life!" Dan yelled to Blaze, as the gallant horse, with ears laid back, strove to interpret his master's will. Dan passed white sleeve after white sleeve; then saw a group of Circle I riders, whirling confusedly in a clustered circle, their horses milling like the steers, barely two hundred yards away. White-sleeved posse men were dashing toward them from all directions.

A scattered volley greeted them. One slug streaked a white-hot line across Dan's cheek—and then the fight was over.

The Circle I crowd had scattered, riding desperately for refuge, and finding none. Dan drove through them; mechanically he had recharged his six-gun after the first burst of firing—and again and again. He couldn't find Doreen! Nor Hart nor Barber. He drove his horse like a madman backward and forward behind the mass of milling cattle.

And then he saw three figures on horseback, darting into the scrub at the base of the peaks, and spurred in pursuit. He could faintly hear a woman's cry above the uproar. As he neared the three, he saw them drop from their horses; next instant flashes of fire stabbed the darkness, and Dan's left arm dropped helplessly as a slug bored through the biceps. Then his own gun was roaring back, and one of the men tumbled face downward and lay kicking in the mesquite.

Next instant a woman's figure came running toward him. Behind her the dark figure of a man, coolly aiming at her. "Drop, Doreen!" Dan yelled—and knew he was not heard! He was close enough now to see Ben Hart, his face twisted with demoniac rage, aiming at the fleeing girl.

But Dan was upon him. He felt Blaze quiver as a slug passed through the pommel of his saddle. Dan emptied his sixgun. But he didn't hit Hart. It was Blaze did that—Blaze who had been trained never to kick a prostrate man! Above the uproar of the steers Dan heard Hart's scream of agony as Blaze's iron-shod feet crushed the man's face into a pulp.

Dan leaped from his saddle and peered into Hart's face. Hart was already passing—passing in agony. And there was no face to peer into. That writhing thing upon the ground that had been Ben Hart was now the personification of anguish and would soon be nothing.

Dan ran to Doreen as she stood, bewildered, among the mesquite bushes, and caught her in his arms. As he did so, there came a flash of fire from the ground, and a slug passed the girl and grazed Dan's arm. Dan flung the girl to the ground, heard the click of a hammer on an empty cylinder, and ran to the side of Barber.

Barber was dying, dying like Hart, but in less agony, and with a little more distinction. He was doubled up, groaning in agony with a slug through the belly, and, even if he had had another cartridge, it was doubtful if he could have used it.

He recognized Dan as Dan stooped over him.

"Damn you!" he spat. "I was goin' to git even with you fer takin' Belle from me. I thought you was fried to cinders. I'll meet you in hell, Gerry. Meet you—in hell."

The last spasmodic quivering of Barber's body was horrible. But Dan

had turned away, to gather Doreen into his arms. She clung to him, he pressed his lips to hers, and felt the warm response of her.

"Thank God I found you," he choked. "Everything's all right, darling. Don't be afraid no more, don't ever be afraid again."

"I wasn't afraid," answered Doreen. "I knew you'd get away and come to me. You see, I prayed, Dan, and I knew I'd get an answer."

There was a calmness about her that baffled Dan. But there was love invincible, shining out of those gray-black eyes of hers. They stood holding each other, their voices drowned by the bawling of the jammed steers.

"Doreen," he said, close to her ear, "you told me how you'd take the long trail with me. Will you start with me tonight, darlin'? They don't want us, these folks. We ain't nothin' but pawns in the game Judge Price was playin' with Easton. Will you ride with me tonight, now? In the mornin' it will be sunshine, like that other mornin' when we woke together. Remember?"

She raised her eyes to his. "If you want me to, Dan, darling. I'll take the long trail with you to the world's end."

"Hey, you, there, you!"

A little group of white-sleeved riders was bearing down upon them. At the sight of Doreen, cries of exultation arose.

"You found her, puncher? She ain't harmed none? But them two coyotes got away somewheres, Barber and Hart."

"Barber's there and Hart's there," answered Dan. "And now, me and Miss Doreen were havin' a private palaver, so I'll say good-night."

A man leaned down from a horse, and Dan recognized Judge Price. "Just like you, Gerry," he grinned. "Want to walk out of the picture, huh?"

He got down deliberately and went up to Dan. "Why, you're bleeding!" he exclaimed. "Let me look at that arm."

Doreen and the young judge began tearing off Dan's blood-soaked sleeve.

"Looks like a nice clean wound," said Price, "but that's got to be bandaged, and you'll need the doctor. Just what was on your mind, Gerry?"

"Oh, we're just through," answered Dan. "Both of us. Tired of playin' your games for you, Judge. No ill feelin's, though."

"I'll want you both at the Circle I," replied the judge, as he tied strips of his handkerchief about Dan's arm. "I'm not likely to need you long—then you can take another crack at life in your blundering way, Gerry, and see where it lands you."

"If it ain't bein' too curious, how did you git here?" asked Dan.

"I was waiting with about a dozen friends of mine near the neck of the pass," he answered. "We had that Circle I crowd trapped on both sides. You see, I closed my rat-trap before sending in the terrier, Gerry. I'm sorry Easton slipped through my fingers, though. I wanted him."

CHAPTER XV

Blessed Heaven

EASTON was at the ranch house dying on the living-room lounge, with a razor at his side, and an ugly trail of blood seeping along the floor. A buckboard with two horses was standing at the door, and in the room with the dying man, vociferously upbraiding him, was Belle Easton. Several half-filled suitcases and a number of garments were strewn about the floor.

So swift was the approach of Judge Price, Bunce, and their party, that Belle was taken completely by surprise. She whirled about, a diamond clasp flashing upon one wrist, and her fingers sparkling with gems.

"I told the old fool not to kill himself. You've got nothing on me!" she shrilled.

"I did it. Haddon came and told

me to!" Dan heard the dying man whisper.

The voice went on whispering inarticulately, then suddenly stopped. Judge Price rose from his knees, looked at what had been Easton, and laid a rug over the face.

"Well, I suppose I can go?" Belle demanded.

"Wait a little," Judge Price nodded to two of his men, who left the room. Dan, weak from loss of blood, had managed to ride with difficulty. He sank into an arm-chair, and Doreen perched herself upon the arm. Price turned to him.

"How're you feeling?" he asked. "Able to stay a while?"

"I'm O.K., Judge. Wound's stopped bleedin'," answered Dan.

The two dead members of the posse had been brought back on horseback. There were four or five others who had sustained wounds, but none of a serious character. In a bunkhouse the surviving members of the Circle I outfit were held under guard. But there wasn't any fight in them.

"Well, what are you holding me here for?" Belle Easton snapped.

At that moment two men walked in at the door, leading a third. Pete Welsh, reeling drunk, hiccoughing, and leering as his eyes fell upon Belle Easton.

She screamed and rushed at him. Judge Price restrained her. "That won't get you anywhere, Mrs. Welsh, alias Hill," he said. "I advise you to be reasonable."

"Damn him, damn him!" she shrilled. "Blackmailing me for years, giving me no peace of mind!"

"The inevitable penalty for bigamy," said Price.

"Blackmailin', huh?" demanded Pete Welsh truculently. "Who's been the sucker? Me! It was Hart, Barber, and Snell who told me that if I'd lay low in Newbury, they'd give me my share of the rake-off after the steers was run off the Circle I. How much've I had to date? Less'n five hundred. And they been rollin' in money."

"But they're dead, and you're alive," said the judge. "You'd best keep quiet, Mrs. Hill, Welsh, or Easton. That sort of stuff won't do you any good." He addressed Pete Welsh, "You married this lady under the name of Hill in California twelve years ago, I believe?" he asked.

"I thought he was dead. He went to Mexico and disappeared, damn his black soul! I thought I was honestly married to Mr. Easton when he turned up and began making his demands on me. Why didn't he come out in the open? Why did he work through Barber and those other scoundrels? Because he's wanted in California, for a shooting ten years ago. That's why he disappeared. Arrest him!"

"I've got no request for extradition," answered the judge. "And it wouldn't do you much good to have to appear in court. Gerry," he continued, turning to Dan.

"What? He's got an alias too?" screamed Belle Easton hysterically. "I knew him as Matthews."

"Gerry, I wanted you on the spot, to give what evidence you knew concerning the sale of those steers in Mexico. I knew that they were rested and fattened on the Broken Bar ranch, near the Border. I had looked up Mrs. Easton's past, and traced her marriage certificate in California. I know that the marriage to Easton was invalid, because Mrs. Easton, as I'll call you, ma'am, hadn't troubled to obtain a divorce from this man. Therefore, under Mr. Haddon's previous will, the Circle I became the property of McImray. That is why when Easton learned his marriage was illegal—"

"Oh, I fooled the old fool!" cried Belle.

"That is why he prepared to strip the Circle I of some fifty thousand dollars' worth of stock. Well, I think justice is satisfied," Judge Price said, "so far as earthly justice goes. You are free, Mrs. Easton. And you," he added to Pete Welsh.

Pete Welsh staggered up to Belle. "How about rememberin' you're my wife, Belle? You've grown a damn fine woman," he snickered.

Belle's fist swung out and felled the little man to the floor, where he lay, sobbing drunkenly. Belle stood glaring at him, then swung about. "Well? Are any of you going to help me out with my baggage?" she demanded.

Dan rose, but Judge Price waved him back to his chair, and picked up two suitcases. Belle Easton began to hum, applied a touch of lipstick with the aid of a compact mirror, gave Dan a glance of mingled mockery and invitation. He could still come with her if he wanted to; if he didn't, there were plenty more men in the world. Then Price was conducting her to the buckboard, and she leaped in and lashed the horses. The vehicle disappeared in the darkness.

They had carried out Easton's body. Now Dan was alone with Doreen. His mind was clouded, he was weak and tired, and it was like a blessed heaven to lay his head upon her breast and feel her arms about him.

She kissed him, with that tenderness he had craved all his life and never known before. He smiled at her happily, and he knew the long trail was ended.

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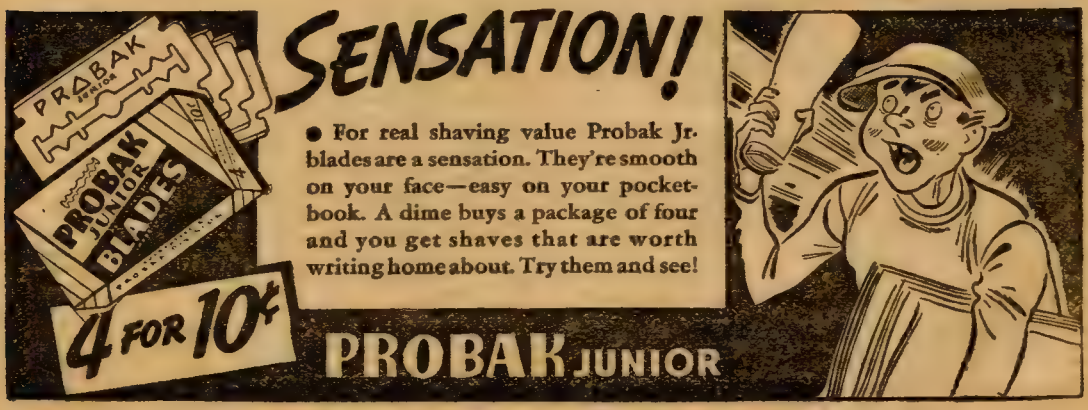
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A sheep-running Mexican wanted Sara's property—and her cowboy sweetheart helped him get it!

By Elsa Barker

Where the Water Runs

SARA McLEOD stopped square in the middle of her sentence. "What's the matter, Clay?" she asked. "What do you see over there?"

The cowboy squinted his eyes in the direction of a pine-covered hillside a quarter-mile away. For a second he had caught a sudden flash of reflected sunlight on gleaming metal.

"Can't be sure," he said. "Maybe just a stump, but it looks like a man, kneeling. Now what in thunder—"

They heard the distant crack of a rifle. The girl's horse stumbled, went down to his knees. Sara kicked her boots out of the stirrups. The pony fell over on his side and lay still.

Clay Randall jumped off his horse and helped the girl to her feet.

"All right, Sara?"

She nodded. Her brown eyes were blazing with anger.

"Why, the dirty, low-down skunk!" she said bitterly.

Clay gave her a sudden shove that sent her to her knees behind the body of her horse.

"Get down out of sight!" he barked, and flopped down beside her.

"He won't shoot again," Sara said. "He got what he was aiming at. Mike Gonzales told me he'd run me out. He told me I couldn't homestead in Gancho County, that he'd always grazed my

piece of land and he intended to go right on using it. He was real generous though—even offered to buy my place for five hundred dollars—and I've put three thousand into it! And I haven't even money enough to buy another horse until I teach school a year and can save some." She tossed her red curls defiantly. Her chin set stubbornly. "Well, I'm not whipped yet!"

Clay Randall didn't say anything. He watched the piny hillside with narrowed eyes. Clay was a fighter himself, but he wondered if Sara really understood just how hopeless her situation was. He wanted to tell her there wasn't any use butting her head against a stone wall, but experience had taught him a certain wary respect for Sara's stubborn, red-haired temper. Sara was like a bronc. She had to be handled gently until she quit fighting of her own accord.

If she'd homesteaded just across the river, in Mesquite County instead of Gancho, things would have been different. Mesquite County had its politicians too, but the county business was mostly run by a group of old-time cattlemen, and they at least wouldn't stoop to persecuting a woman.

Clay pulled the makings from his pocket and rolled himself a thin brown pill.

"You reckon you can walk home, Sara? That hombre's pulled his freight now. Maybe Stockings and I can catch him."

The girl's brown eyes turned suddenly anxious.

"No!" she said flatly. "Let him go, Clay. You'll just get in trouble. You may be a deputy in Mesquite County, but that won't save you from sticking your head in a noose if you interfere with Mike Gonzales or any of his gang in Gancho County."

The young cowboy grinned at her as he got to his feet. "Plumb good advice, Sara," he said. "Try takin' some of it sometime!"

The girl stepped closer and caught his arm with both her hands. "Wait, Clay! If you won't go I'll—I'll—"

"Well?" he prompted softly.

Sara dropped her hands and turned away. Color stole into her cheeks.

"Oh, nothing! Only be careful, won't you?"

For a second Clay looked down at her tousled curls. Then he grinned a little, turned to his horse and swung into the saddle.

"I'll pick up your saddle on my way back," he said.

The girl nodded, a worried line between her eyebrows.

On the knoll where he had seen the kneeling man Clay pulled up his horse and dismounted. He picked up an empty .303 cartridge shell, examined it and stuck it in his pocket. He looked up at the timber through which the man had disappeared. Stockings tossed his head and stamped impatiently, fighting the big black flies that buzzed around him persistently. That gave the cowboy an idea.

He scouted up through the pines until he found where the unidentified hombre's horse had been tied. Apparently the flies had been bad here too. He found a half a dozen sorrel horse hairs on the brush where the animal had rubbed his head, fighting them off.

Clay was grinning a little grimly as he ran down the hill and hit the saddle. The man was almost certainly one of Mike Gonzales' vaqueros. Clay had seen that he was wearing a black hat. Now he also knew he was riding a sorrel horse and carried a .303 rifle.

He gave Stockings a touch of the spurs and headed him up the trail in a long-legged run toward Gonzales' Lazy Dollar Ranch. If the vaquero suspected he was being followed he would keep to the timber, making pursuit as difficult as possible. Clay figured that by sticking to the trail he might have a chance to cut him off and catch him before he reached the home ranch.

Stockings hammered out three straining miles before Clay sighted his

quarry. The vaquero, evidently figuring that all danger of pursuit was past, had stopped and let his horse go down to the river to drink. He spied Clay at almost the same instant.

The vaquero leaned low on his horse and urged him forward. The horse was tired and thirsty. For a second he reared and fought his head. Clay saw the Mexican's spurs bite deep into the animal's sides. The horse plunged out of the water and up the opposite bank. Meantime Stockings had closed the distance between them by another fifty yards.

The Mexican looked back. He drew his sixgun and sent a couple of wild shots over his shoulder. Clay sat a little lower in his saddle. His lips drew back from his teeth in a grim scowl. He didn't draw his gun. He knew that it took more than a darned good shot to hit a moving object from the back of a running horse—it took a miracle.

Gradually the distance between the horses was lessening. The vaquero fired wildly over his shoulder again. Clay let down his lass rope and began building a loop. The Mexican looked back, gave a wild yell, and ducked low on his horse's neck.

Clay twirled the loop over his head, then like a long tawny rattlesnake it struck out and settled over the vaquero's shoulders. The Mexican screamed in terror, clawed futilely with his hands to pull away the cord that tightened around his shoulders.

Stockings planted his feet in the ground and plowed to a jarring stop. The vaquero sailed off of his running horse and hit the ground with a thud. For an instant he lay still, then struggled to get to his feet. Stockings was an old roping horse and he treated the Mexican like he would a struggling calf. He backed away, kept the rope taut, pulled the man off balance every time he tried to rise.

The other horse ran a dozen yards, then stopped, looked questioningly over his shoulder and began grazing on the short cropped grass. Clay swung to the ground, caught the horse and led him back. Then he loosened the rope and allowed his prisoner to rise.

"You damned skunk!" he said contemptuously. "I oughta beat the hell out of you!"

The Mexican was nursing an injured wrist. He looked blank, shrugged his shoulders.

"Yo no comprendo inglés."

"Oh, you don't speak English, huh?" Clay said grimly.

He pulled the vaquero's sixgun out of its holster and threw it as far into the grass as he could. The Mexican cringed a little before the contempt and anger in his eyes.

"I reckon a man can't fight a little feller like you," the cowboy said regretfully. "'Specially when you're so damn scared."

Then Clay pulled the Mexican's rifle out of its scabbard, levered it and squinted through the barrel. It was an expensive gun and in good condition. He ran an appraising eye over the Mexican's outfit, then slipped the silver-mounted bridle off the horse and tossed it across his shoulder.

"I reckon I'll take these with me. And they'll be put in a place where you won't find 'em right sudden. If you want 'em back, you take Miss McLeod seventy-five dollars to buy another horse with. Savvy?"

The vaquero gave him a funny look. "All right," he said quietly. "Tomorrow I breeng heem!"

His gaze flickered past Clay's face, over his shoulder. A devil of impudence began suddenly to dance in his black eyes.

The cowboy whirled. At the edge of the pine timber scarcely thirty yards away, Mike Gonzales and two more of his vaqueros had left their horses and were walking toward him, their fingers clamped suggestively upon gun holts protruding above bulging holsters.

CLAY RANDALL knew when he was licked. Mike Gonzales was practically unbeatable in Gancho County. His brother Pete was county sheriff, and his brother-in-law, Louis Aragon, was district judge; but it was Mike himself who wielded the whip and when he cracked it they jumped through the hoops like trained monkeys in a circus. Men in Gancho County didn't usually question Mike's authority—more than once.

The man Clay had roped became *muy bravo*. His hand snaked down, grabbed the cowboy's sixgun and jammed it into his own holster.

"Dog!" he snarled. He swung his right arm and slapped the cowboy's face.

Clay's temper suddenly snapped its leash. "You cowardly little scrub!" he gritted.

Clay caught the little man by the collar, lifted him off his feet, and shook him, like he would a dusty rug, then set him down and gave him a cuff on the ear that sent him spinning in the grass.

The little Mexican's face contorted with rage. He clawed at the gun in his holster. Mike Gonzales' voice stopped him.

"Hold it, Mari!" he said softly. He looked Clay Randall's tall, lean frame over with an insolent grin.

"What you doing here?" His voice was soft. He spoke English with only the slightest trace of an accent.

Clay looked contemptuously down at the Mexican sprawled in the grass.

"This pup of yours killed a horse for Sara McLeod this afternoon. I came to collect for it, that's all."

Gonzales shook his head and clucked his tongue sympathetically.

"That's bad!" he said. "There must be a mistake."

"Mistake, hell!" Clay exploded. "I can prove it."

Gonzales' grin broadened a little. "I think you make bad mistake," he repeated. He turned to the two vaqueros at his side. "Mari's been with us all afternoon, eh, boys?"

Solemnly the two nodded. For a minute Clay stared at their blank faces, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"All right!" he said. "You win this time, and to hell with you!"

"I always win," Mike Gonzales said coldly. "Get on your horse and get out! I let you off this time because I don't want trouble, but if you set foot on my place again, my boys'll kill. Savvy?"

Clay's face whitened with anger. The fists held rigidly at his side were clenched so tight the nails bit into the palms of his hands. A mad desire to smash his fists into Mike Gonzales' fat face surged through his blood. Instead, he walked to his horse and swung into the saddle. Getting himself arrested and railroaded to the pen for several years for criminal assault wouldn't help Sara McLeod any.

Clay Randall knew when he was licked, but he never stayed licked long. As he rode away, beneath his own immediate rage, he was trying to figure out some way to get the girl out of the hopeless mess she had got herself into. The main difficulty was that Sara didn't want to be got out. She wanted to stay right where she was and fight.

Sara had been raised on a ranch. It was the only life she knew and she loved it. Up until a couple of years ago her life had been as free and happy as the prairie winds. Then her parents had died and when the estate was finally settled she found that after debts and mortgages were paid she had only a few thousand dollars left from what had once been a considerable fortune.

Sara had homesteaded on a little piece of ground in the corner of Gancho County. With most of her slender stake she'd built a snug little house, put up a good windmill, and fenced the whole place with a strong four-wire fence. Winters she had gone to the Normal School at San Rosario until

she had enough credits to get a teacher's certificate.

Sara had visions of becoming a cattle queen herself. She figured on saving enough out of her teacher's salary in a few years' time to give her a modest start in the cow business.

A year ago, when Clay first met her, he'd tried to tell her that a woman couldn't swing it alone, that she couldn't possibly hope to buck Mike Gonzales. He'd also tried to persuade her that she was the kind of a woman who ought to confine her talents to taking care of a home and a husband.

He hadn't changed his mind about that, but he had changed tactics. Sara was sweet, and affectionate, and courageous, but she could also be stubborn and wilful. She didn't like to be told she couldn't do things.

The future didn't look any too bright to Clay Randall. He thought Sara loved him. Sometimes she even acted as if she intended to marry him some day, but Clay was afraid he was going to get mighty tired of waiting for her to get around to it.

A half a mile from Sara's south fence, Clay spied a herd of sheep and a herder. He swore.

"Gonzales sheep!" he muttered. "And headed straight for Sara's pasture!"

He kicked Stockings into a lope again. Presently he pulled up alongside the herder. A dozen of the ewes with lambs had already crawled under the fence and were nipping hungrily at the rich grass. The rest of the herd were crowding close on their heels.

"What's the idea? Get these sheep headed back the other way, *pronto!*" Clay said sharply.

The herder shrugged his shoulders and looked blank. "No savvy."

The cowboy swung down from his horse. He grabbed the herder by his ragged shoulders and swung him around. He planted a forceful kick on the seat of the sagging britches.

"Well, you better savvy, and *muy* damn *pronto!* Get them sheep outa here!" He yanked his rifle from the saddle scabbard and poked it menacingly in the herder's stomach. "And if I ever catch you around here again I'll dust the soles of your feet with hot lead!"

The Mexican cringed, took one frightened look at the cowboy's grim face, and decided not to argue the point.

"Si, señor! Si, señor!" he gasped aloud.

He scurried under the fence, and began shooing and clucking at the little bunch of ewes like a frightened mother hen.

Clay leaned against a fence post and waited until the herder had his sheep all outside the fence again and headed back in the direction from whence they had come.

"Now you keep movin'," he ordered. "I'll be back after while to see that you ain't changed your mind. And in case you don't savvy *inglés,* maybe you do savvy this." He patted the barrel of the rifle.

The herder gave him a scared look. *"Sí, señor! Sí, señor!"*

The long evening shadows were beginning to fade into the gray mistiness of twilight. Outside, it wouldn't be dark yet for another half hour but the windows of Sara McLeod's cabin already glowed with the yellow rays of lamplight.

In the east the sky was lightened by occasional flashes of lightning. There was a cool breeze blowing and heavy black clouds were thickening rapidly. In another hour it would be raining.

Sara had heard the thud of Clay's horse's hoofs and was standing in the door listening.

"Clay?" she called softly. Then she pushed back the screen door and ran down the steps to meet him. "You're all right? I've been so worried!"

The light from the open door fell on her upturned head and did wonderful and mysterious things to her red-brown curls and soft dark eyes.

Clay leaned down and pressed her hand.

"Well, honey, I reckon I'll have to holler calf rope. He got away from me."

"You didn't even recognize who it was?"

"Oh, yeah. I caught him and had him about in the notion of ridin' over and payin' you for that horse tomorrow, when Gonzales and a couple of his *pelados* rode up and changed his mind for him again."

"Clay, promise me you won't get mixed up in this again!" She caught her breath sharply. "Maybe I've been a silly, stubborn little mule about this place—and I'm going to be for a little while longer—but I don't want anybody getting hurt on my account. Maybe Mike Gonzales will make me leave, maybe he won't. I like this place and I love living here, but that isn't worth you getting killed or sent to the pen. Keep out of this fight, Clay, please!"

The smile Clay Randall gave her was tender.

"I'm plumb obstinate myself, sometimes, Sara," he said gently. "But don't you worry none. My hide's tough. And there never was a river so wide it couldn't be crossed somehow."

Sara didn't answer that. She knew it was useless to plead any more. There were some jobs a man just figured he had to do if he still wanted to call himself a man. Worry gnawed in her breast, and she couldn't get away from the guilty feeling that her own stubbornness was the cause of the trouble, yet gladness and pride shone in her eyes that this tall, blue-eyed cowboy had elected himself her protector.

"Won't you come in for supper?" she asked. "It's almost ready now."

He shook his head. "Not tonight. Thanks, Sara. It looks like it's goin' to rain, and I've got work to do. I'll be over tomorrow or the next day and bring you a horse to use the rest of the summer."

"But—but, Clay, maybe he'll get shot too."

Clay squeezed her fingers briefly.

"That's my responsibility, young lady. Good-night."

THE RIO SALADO was going places and going in a hurry. For two days and nights the rain had poured down in steady sheets until the clear little creek was full to the top of its steep banks with muddy, rushing water. The sun was out again now, but it would be hours, perhaps days, before the river would be down to normal.

Stockings poked a curious nose out to the edge of the roily water and snorted windily. Clay Randall hunched over on one side of the saddle and frowned.

Across the creek he could see Sara McLeod sitting on the steps of her little house, with a rifle across her knees, staring down toward her horse pasture. Clay looked too and suddenly swore.

Mike Gonzales, on a prancing black horse, was leading a big herd of sheep straight for the girl's pasture fence. Behind them a ragged herder whistled and yelled to keep the laggards moving. Clay looked at the river desperately. The bridge was washed out and Stockings had considerably less than a gambler's chance of swimming it. The river was swift and deep, and the bank on the other side was so steep that even if he should be able to swim across, it would be almost impossible for him to pull himself up over the edge.

Here the country on either side of the river opened out into a smooth open valley, but a quarter of a mile farther up the canyon grew more rugged. Huge boulders dotted the river banks, and in spots timber grew to the water's edge. As he looked up that way, trying to remember how the land lay, and trying to figure what his chances of getting across farther up

would be, a queer look slowly spread over Clay's face. He sucked in his breath sharply.

"By damn!" he whispered softly to himself. "Maybe I can do it."

He shifted his eyes back to Mike Gonzales. They were nearly to the fence now. Gonzales stepped off of his horse and snipped the four-wire fence in several places. He tossed the wire back out of the way and helped the herder chouse the leaders across the line.

Slowly Sara McLeod raised the rifle to her shoulders. Clay Randall yelled, but the noise of the water between them was too great for her to hear him. Her rifle suddenly spoke and the goat in the lead toppled over. Panicked, the sheep started running in fifty different directions like ants in a disturbed ant hill. Mike Gonzales waved his arms violently a dozen times at the herder, then jumped into the saddle again and urged the big black into a swift gallop straight for the house.

Deliberately Sara raised the rifle to her shoulder again, aimed this time, Clay could see, at Mike Gonzales instead of the herd. Sheer panic gripped Clay Randall and seemed to squeeze every drop of blood from his heart. Should she shoot Mike Gonzales it would take more than one lone cowboy to save her or her place from vengeance in Gancho County.

"Why, the darned little wildcat!" he cried.

Swiftly he yanked his rifle from the scabbard and sent a bullet spinning into the mud a few yards to her right.

Startled, Sara jumped to her feet. The rifle slid down from her shoulder. Clay waved his arms wildly. He didn't know much about sign language but Sara seemed to savvy what he meant. She nodded her head, then leaned her rifle against the house and waved her empty hands to him.

Clay found an old envelope and a stub of a pencil in one of his pockets and hurriedly scrawled a note. He picked a small rock out of the mud, tied the note around it with a leather thong from his saddle, and hurled it across the river.

He waited until he saw Sara cross the yard and pick it up, then he turned Stockings back in the direction of Mesquite City and spurred him into a swift lope.

Sara's brown eyes blazed with anger when she read the note. She stared unbelievingly at the departing cowboy's long, lean back. Was Clay really quitting then? Did he think for a minute that she would, too? Why, she'd go to the district attorney and swear out a warrant for Mike Gonzales' arrest. At least the D. A. wasn't related to him, even if he was one of the political gang. She'd go to the governor himself and plead for protection. She'd get herself a soap box and go to the county seat and stand in the middle of the street and tell everybody just what sort of a scrub Mike Gonzales really was. There were lots of things she could do before she was really licked. She'd make him realize he'd been in a fight before *she* quit.

She looked at the note again. Clay had written:

> "Kid him along, honey. Tell him you're ready to sell. Ask him to come back tonight at eight and close the deal. Have a deed made out ready for him. Keep your chin up."

Gradually Sara's tense face softened. She began to see that she was being a little bit silly. Maybe Clay had something up his sleeve, and anyway, when she wasn't too mad to think straight, she knew that without Clay Randall's help all the things she could do wouldn't amount to a hill of beans against Mike Gonzales' political influence in his own county.

Clay wasn't quitting, and even if he was, what was the difference? She loved him more than she did this little piece of land, didn't she? She didn't want to see him hurt.

She turned and faced Mike Gonzales. Mike was mad. His swarthy cheeks

were puffed out with anger, and he was sputtering like an angry hen.

"You shot my goat! You—you—" He gave that up. He couldn't quite call this girl by the only English swear words he knew. "I'll have you arrested! The judge'll give you two years for that!"

In spite of herself Sara giggled a little at the pomposity of his anger.

"Do you still want to buy this place?" she asked.

The anger smoothed out of Gonzales' face like magic.

"Why, yes, *señorita,*" he said politely. His black eyes became crafty. "Of course it's not worth what it was the other day. I notice your south fence is down in several places, and you've been letting a herd of sheep in the horse pasture! Too bad! I'm sorry, but this place's only worth four hundred now!"

Sara felt her anger rising again, but with an effort she controlled it.

"Then come back tonight at eight," she said quietly, "and I'll have the deed ready for you."

Mike Gonzales' eyes widened in surprise. He studied the girl's face intently, as if suspecting a trick.

"All right," he agreed. "But remember it isn't smart to try and fool Mike Gonzales!"

The sheep and herder had reached the yard now and were spreading over the girl's flower beds and into her garden, nipping eagerly at the small tender plants. Sara's back stiffened. She walked over to the house and picked up the rifle.

"This place is mine until eight o'clock tonight," she said icily. "You get off of it and take your sheep with you! I'm going in the house now, but I'm coming out again in a half hour and then I'm going to kill every sheep in sight!"

Mike Gonzales smiled. He could afford not to get angry now.

"Why, of course, *señorita.* Tonight at eight, then. And have that deed ready for me!"

SARA found the rest of that day interminable. From inside she could hear the blatting of the sheep on every side of the cabin, mingled with the shouts and whistles of the herder. Gradually the noise lessened as they pulled away from the house, leaving only the sullen boom of the swollen Rio Salado.

Sara put on a pair of old levis and went outside to survey the wreckage. Her inner restlessness was too great for her to remain idle. She spent the morning working in the flower beds and garden, coddling the few plants that had escaped trampling or eating. Then, scolding herself for being a darned fool, she walked down and fixed the fence.

By afternoon the place had regained some of its former neatness and order. And still she couldn't keep still. She went inside the cabin and swept and dusted and scrubbed. When she worked hard it didn't seem like there was much time to grieve over the little place that wouldn't be hers much longer. Perhaps if she got tired enough she wouldn't even mind signing the deed tonight.

Several times during the late afternoon she stopped and listened. From way up the canyon she thought she heard strange noises. Something like gun-fire, only duller, heavier roars. She was half tempted to walk up that way and investigate until she finally persuaded herself that it was probably some cowboy shooting at coyotes.

The minutes and the hours dragged by. Strangely enough she failed to notice just when the roar of the river began to subside, but at dusk she saw that the flood was lowering fast.

It was eight when Clay Randall came. Sara heard him speak to Stockings, then she heard the clank of metal tools being tossed down by the step.

She swung open the door. The light from the lamp fell full upon the cowboy.

"Clay!" she gasped. "What in the world have you been doing?"

He grinned at her.

"Howdy, honey! Will you let a dirty man come in your house?"

Her eyes gaped at him as she held open the door. His clothes were covered with thick, drying mud. There was an ugly scratch across one cheek and one eye was swollen almost shut and rapidly turning black and blue.

He looked at his hands and grinned.

"I tried to wash in the river, but it's plenty roily tonight and I didn't do much good."

"Where have you been?"

Clay grinned again. He was tired and dirty but his eyes were jubilant.

"Fixin' things, honey. Jest fixin' things, I hope. You got that deed ready for Gonzales?"

Sara nodded.

"Let me see it, will you?"

She handed it to him. He read it through carefully, then said:

"It looks all right to me, Sara, except for one thing. You got the amount wrong."

Sara shook her head.

"No, that's right," she said bitterly. "He lowered his offer this morning. Said I hadn't kept the place in good condition—that I'd been letting sheep run in my pasture and some of my fences were down! The darned old scrub!"

"Don't worry about it, Sara," he said quickly. "It's going to be all right."

He picked up a pen, sat at the table and scratched out her figures, writing a neat new row above them. Sara leaned over his shoulder, watching. Her eyes grew more mystified than ever.

"Are you crazy, Clay? He'll never pay four thousand for this place!"

"He will if he gets it! He's a little late, ain't he?"

"I think I hear him now and— Listen, Clay, he's talking to somebody! He's brought some of his vaqueros with him! Give me back that deed! He'll be fighting mad if he sees the way you have it. Let him have the old place at his own price! Please, Clay! I don't want any more trouble!"

Clay patted her shoulder reassuringly. His voice sounded dry and hard.

"There won't be any—if he's smart." He crossed the room and opened the door. Gonzales and two of his vaqueros swaggered in. They were all three wet to the waist and they dripped small puddles of water on the girl's clean floor. Her eyes were a little bewildered.

Where had they been? There was no river to cross between her place and the Lazy Dollar.

Mike Gonzales' expression tightened a little at sight of Clay Randall.

"I thought I told you to keep out of Gancho County, Randall!"

"I asked him here," Sara said coldly.

Gonzales eyed the cowboy contemptuously.

"You don't pick very clean friends, *señorita*."

"He's never been called a sheepherder," Sara said icily.

The big Mexican chuckled a little. He let his eyes rove around the room.

"Nice cabin. Not a fine *hacienda*, of course, but it will do for my sheepherder!"

Sara winced. She remembered the dirty, ragged herder and the thought of him living in her pretty, snug home hurt.

"You have the deed ready?"

"Sure," answered Clay. "Here it is."

The Mexican took it. He read it through twice before he raised his head. Then he looked at Sara and involuntarily she took a step back nearer Clay. Gonzales' face had undergone a subtle change. Behind the small, crafty eyes there lurked a black, deadly anger.

"A mistake, *señorita*," he said softly. "The amount was four hundred, not four thousand."

"Four thousand," Clay said firmly. "Take it or leave it."

"I leave it! And tomorrow, *señorita*, I think the sheepherder will move in and you maybe not have the chance to

move out!" He started toward the door. "Come, Mari, Beni! We are through here!"

"Not quite!" Clay stepped in front of him. "You wanted this place! Now, by damn, you're goin' to buy it!"

"You forget I am Miguel Gonzales, *gringo?*" The Mexican's hand came to rest on the gleaming pearl of his gun holt.

"No," said Clay dryly, "I'm just remembering it!"

His right hand reached out swiftly, slapping the Mexican's fingers away from his gun. His left hand brought a folded paper from his pocket and extended it.

"This is a warrant for your arrest, Gonzales!"

The hands of the two vaqueros had gone to their guns, and seeing the move, Clay's right swung down close to his own. Then suddenly Mike Gonzales' paunch shook with heavy, sneering laughter.

"¡Mira no mas!" he jeered. "A warrant he brings for the arrest of Mike Gonzales in Gancho County!"

"Mesquite County, now, Mike," said the cowboy quietly. "Read the warrant!"

Contemptuously Gonzales struck the paper to the floor.

"Warrants! Bah!" he said scornfully. "Even the county lines he changes, this *gringo bravo!* Out of my way! Come, *compadres!* We go now —before I lose temper and kill this *gringo* idiot!"

Suddenly Clay's sixgun was out, its barrel not a foot from the big Mexican's paunch.

"Idiot or not, Mike, you're in Mesquite County now, under my jurisdiction as a deputy sheriff, where the law ain't controlled by a bunch of you damn sheepherders! Didn't you cross a river tonight to get here?"

Across the Mexican's face, puffed red with anger like a teased horny toad, came a look of puzzlement.

"Sure," he shrugged. "The flood so high some of the water from Rio Salado is running down the Arroyo Seco, but that's got nothing to do with—"

"Not just *some* of the water, Mike," said Clay Randall softly, backing away a step so that there would be room to swing his gun upon the two vaqueros if he had to. "Not some of it, but *all* of it, since about five this afternoon, and I don't need to tell you that Arroyo Seco is the old river bed, dry since a flood shifted the channel in 1904. It ain't the Arroyo Seco now. It's the Rio Salado—the *county line*—and Miss McLeod's place is now in Mesquite County. Are you buying it at four thousand or do you want to stand trial before a jury of Anglo cattlemen for threatening a woman and trespassing on her property? The American ranchers in this county wouldn't be any too pleased with you. They might have ideas about fence-cutting sheepmen. In fact I've spoken to a few—"

Mike Gonzales got the idea and got it in a hurry. His eyes bulged slightly as he took a step backward, giving room for his vaqueros' guns. But their eyes were riveted on the ready barrel of the cowboy's .45 and they made no move.

"Bah!" said Mike Gonzales, but his voice lacked conviction. "The courts will hold the river's course does not change the county line! Wait! I will prove it!"

"I don't aim to wait," said Clay. "I looked that up this morning. The same question came up when the Salado changed its course the first time. The Supreme Court held that the river is where the water runs and since the law said the river was the boundary, that's where it was. You're buyin' a piece of Mesquite County property, Mike, for four thousand, cash!"

"No!" grunted the Mexican abruptly. "Beni! Mari! Shoot now!"

But the two vaqueros only shrugged sullenly.

Clay Randall laughed dryly. It was Gonzales' turn to shrug now.

"Sign the deed, *señorita,*" he said. "I make you the check."

FIVE MINUTES later they were alone. The girl's eyes, looking up at the cowboy still held a look of fear.

"Clay, they might have killed you!"

"But they didn't, honey."

"But the check—maybe it won't be good!"

Clay grinned.

"He signed it in Mesquite County, in the presence of witnesses. It'll be good all right."

"But the river! How—"

"Simple enough," Clay interrupted. "I just went up to where the old channel cuts off, tore out some driftwood, dug it out a little, slashed down a few trees and blasted some rocks into the river. The water soon did the rest."

Even now, with something of the starriness of love in her eyes, Sara McLeod was a little stubborn.

"But if my place is in Mesquite County now, why did I have to sell it, Clay?"

Clay drew a long breath.

"I thought maybe," he said softly, "you'd like to quit teaching school in order to support this property. Besides, this Rio Salado is treacherous. Maybe I was bluffing a little, for tomorrow it might cut back into the other channel and land you in Gancho County again. Now you've got enough money to buy you a little ranch over in Mesquite—where there won't be a river between us."

Sara drew a long, tremulous breath. "I don't think I want to buy another place, Clay, to try and run—alone."

Clay Randall stood very still.

"Gosh, honey," he stammered, "I've got mud all over my arms, and I—"

Sara came to him then. Her eyes were shining.

"I wouldn't worry about a little mud, Clay," she said softly.

And he didn't.

DON'T FORGET THE THIRD NOVEMBER ISSUE!

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Girl He Left Behind Him

By Herbert A. Woodbury

Hugh, young and care-free, dreaded marriage's responsibility, until he discovered Anne was willing to sacrifice her happiness for his.

HE HAD boarded up his cabin, packed his mules with his winter's fur catch, and started south. And now, all that warm, drowsy spring afternoon, as he rode down out of the high hills through the budding pines and the frail yellow-leafed aspens, with the gusty March wind blowing soft in his tanned face, Hugh Deering fought a battle with his conscience.

Should he, now that he was entering the green mountain meadow lands of Buffalo Prairie's wide far-flung park, turn with the twilight tonight into the Dutchman's tiny ranch? Or shouldn't he?

Hugh Deering closed his bright, restlessly alive, dark eyes for a moment; and his thoughts went winging back, just as they'd winged back at intervals all those snowy months that he'd attended his lonely trap lines, to a tall, tanned young girl with full, broad

shoulders and glacier blue eyes and hair the dull dusky color of the morning sun as it burned through a canyon mist.

He had met Anne Evans at the Dutchman's in the fall. Toward the end of that previous October, Hugh had left Red Dog, broke, after frittering away his earnings of the season before in a summer of soft, idle, luxurious living in places like the Fan-Tan and the Palace and the Lady Slipper and the Horseshoe. His first night out of Red Dog, he'd partaken of a tin of corned beef which had turned out to be contaminated. Late that next afternoon, nauseatedly sick with ptomaine, more dead than alive, he'd guided his saddle pony and driven his pack animals into old Hans Mueller's tiny ranchyard by sheer instinct alone.

There'd followed a couple of days of which Hugh had no lucid memory. Then he'd awakened from his grogginess and devastating weakness to find himself in old Hans's great four-poster bed, being administered to by a girl.

She was staying with old Hans, it seemed. She and her father had hit Buffalo Prairie that summer in a covered wagon drawn by two decrepit and exhausted nags. They'd asked old Hans's permission to camp on his land. Only, generous old Hans had refused to hear to their camping out in the elements. This was wild frontier country; there were rustler raids; there were prowlers. Hans had installed the two of them, the girl and her sick, consumptive father, in his cabin. . . .

Hugh remembered all this now as he watched the land slope gently downward that afternoon. Lavender twilight seeped into the basin. Through the haze and the mist, Hugh could see presently a clump of pines; and, under the pines, old Hans Mueller's gray, mud-chinked cabin and his brown, weatherbeaten outbuildings. Should he turn in, he asked himself? Meekly surrender, like some milk-sop, to a conscience that hadn't any place in the make-up of a man who was strong and young and red-blooded? Or should he skirt old Hans's split-rail pine fences; camp tonight by himself a little farther on, in Granite Canyon, avoid the girl like the plague, and be in Red Dog, safe from her, in two more days?

Glamorous town, Red Dog! There for a moment, Hugh's vision of the girl, Anne, blurred. Instead of gold hair and blue eyes, Hugh saw in his mind's eye the long, frosted mirror and the shining mahogany bar in the Palace. He could hear the piano banging in the Lady Slipper and see girls in pink ballet skirts . . . and hear the click of ivory inlaid chips at the Fan-Tan. He imagined for a moment that he sat at a table in the Horseshoe, in the genial companionship of men, amidst thick layers of blue tobacco smoke, watching a red-nosed Irish comedian in comical checked pants too big for him, do tricks and tell witty stories on the stage.

Then Red Dog where he lived like a king, in idleness every summer, faded and Hugh Deering saw the girl, Anne, again. Saw himself standing beside her, that last day that he'd spent with old Hans, in the fall.

Anne had asked permission to ride with him out into the mountain meadow, purple with wild bee-weed, that afternoon when he'd gone out to round up his animals which old Hans had turned into pasture during his illness. They had paused at a mossy spring in a cleft of gray rock for a drink. And the girl had stood so close to him for a second that a wisp of that dull dusky gold hair of hers, blown by the breeze, had brushed his forehead.

It all came back, as it had come back a thousand times since. Six months had passed since then, but Hugh could see himself turning and feel the hot-red blood mounting to his head like sparkling burgundy wine. What had come over him, he hadn't known then; and hadn't been able to figure since. She wasn't like the girls in the Lady Slipper, and he knew it.

For days, there under her care, he'd

told himself, "She's different; watch yourself." And he had watched himself. But in that moment when the breeze had blown her hair into his face, he'd surprised a sudden light that was both boldness and bashfulness in her eyes; time and space and caution and good sense had suspended.

He'd caught Anne Evans suddenly, hungrily, roughly in his arms, and she hadn't been coy or kittenish or angry or insulted, or the way some girls were when, impudently, you stole a kiss. She'd trembled in his arms; then her arms had slipped up round his neck; her lips had touched his with all his frantic, desperate eagerness.

Hugh felt his nails dig, today, in agony, in anguish, in remorse, into the calloused palms of his brawny clenched fists. He asked himself today as he'd asked himself then—why? Why had he kissed her like that? He didn't love her. He didn't love any woman, and he didn't want to. Some men were cut out for a home and domesticity; it was instinct within them just as mating and nesting were instinct with the brown quail and the fawn morning dove. But there was none of that in him, and there never had been, and there never would be! Life for him was winters in the wilderness —back of beyond—where you couldn't take a woman, and summers in town amidst the bluff, hearty, virile, roistering companionship of men.

The passion had ebbed out of him, that day, the instant he'd felt the abandon and the surrender of her lips. He remembered how he felt about settling down; he'd thrust Anne from him as rudely and as roughly as he'd caught her; he'd stood there staring at her, knowing she loved him; knowing she felt he loved her. He wasn't a cad or a philanderer and, by all heaven, he didn't want to be! Women? Women had their place in his life as they had a place in the life of any man, young and strong and normal. He liked to dance with the girls in the Lady Slipper and tease the waitresses in the Coffee Cup; yes, and whenever it was a sporting gamble whether he could kiss a girl or get his face slapped, there was fun and a kick to that. But Anne was not the sort of girl who took a kiss lightly. She would expect him to stay —to marry her in time.

Miserable and contrite, his apology came from the depths of his honestly penitent soul—he'd apologized that fall day to Anne Evans. Without tears and without recrimination, Anne had smiled at him and said valiantly, "It was as much my fault, Hugh, as it was yours. I asked to ride out here with you, didn't I? I was the one who suggested stopping, wasn't I?" Yes, she'd insisted upon shouldering at least half the responsibility; smiled at him in forgiveness and said, "And now let's forget it. Both of us." Only . . . .

Only, today, as Hugh Deering rode nearer and nearer the Dutchman's tiny ranch, he fought a battle with his conscience. Had it made any difference, he wondered, that Anne had forgiven him? He could feel again the all-giving generousness flow over from her lips to his. How, he wondered, did a girl feel after she'd offered a man her heart and had it handed back to her? He knew how the man felt.

Hugh jogged on. He hit the gate of old Hans's fenced, inner ranch. He cast an anguished glance on down the red rutted trail that led on past to Red Dog. Glamorous Red Dog! Then he dismounted and opened Hans's gate. He'd had an excuse in the fall, perhaps, for riding off into the hills. He'd been broke. But he hadn't any excuse now. He had three thousand dollars' worth of pelts aboard his mules, today. Today, he could say to Anne Evans—and today he *would* say to Anne Evans —in all honor and honorableness, "Marry me, Anne."

Like a man poised on a cliff, ready to dive into deep, perilous waters where he must assuredly drown, but drawn irresistibly to those waters by a power too strong to fight, Hugh followed the goad of his conscience down the lane.

IT WAS deep twilight. There in the shadowy lane, the girl's scream had an eery ring to it as it floated to Hugh Deering through the trees, up from the cabin. He jerked in on his reins. He sat his saddle for an infinitesimal split-second, chilled to the core. Then in automatic reflex he sank his spurs in the shaggy bay.

The animal leaped forward, scattering the mules ahead. The last hundred yards of the trail blurred. Hugh Deering flung himself from the saddle at the cabin stoop, shouldered open the wooden door. And, abruptly, here no longer was a situation which a man's reluctant conscience must decide. Here was a situation which cried for action. And here in Hugh Deering, young and strong, was a man of action.

The inside of old Hans's cabin kitchen was a shambles. Amidst the wreckage of overturned table and chairs a man with the straight black hair of a half-breed and a girl with hair of dull dusky gold were struggling. Hugh tore for the man. Only the breed was the more nimble. Whirling, the man flung the girl from him. She fell against the cabin wall with a crash, and slumped. The breed came toward Hugh, head lowered, arms pawing.

A head like rock caught Hugh in the stomach. The pawing arms circled his knees. He went over backward, the stone doorsill struck his head, a million lights exploded in his brain; he felt fingers like steel at his throat. Clawing futilely at the vise-like fingers, Hugh waited a split-second, an eternity, for the girl to come to his rescue with an iron skillet, a poker. Only she couldn't. She lay there, he saw out of the corner of his bulging, popping eye, motionless where she'd fallen.

The sight gave him a berserk fury which served as strength. There at his throat, he caught a finger, bent it back. A bone cracked. The breed screamed, seized, in instinct, Hugh's hand. Teeth sank into Hugh's palm. But he could breathe, now. The air filled his cramped lungs with a swish, cleared his head. Hugh doubled his knees forward, shot them upward. The breed went backwards and bounded to his feet again.

The breed stooped to scoop up a chair-leg. Hugh dived for the man, smashing into him and bowling him over; they clinched again and rolled. The breed took a grip on Hugh's hair and swung his thumb, gouging down into his eye. Hugh drove a short jab, powered from the elbow, mercilessly into the man's groin. The thumb came out of his eye. He rocked back on his heels, flung himself forward, his doubled knees smashing into the breed's midriff. The man rolled from under him.

A knife flashed from somewhere into the breed's hand. Hugh sprang upward and away, getting hold of his foe by the boot, and lifting him so that only his shoulders touched the floor, and the knife which left the brown hand was hurled without momentum. Then the boot kicked violently and Hugh lost it. The breed bounded to his feet, dived for the door. Hugh reached the threshold too late. Hoofbeats pounded. Roaring off round the corner of one of the outbuildings loped the breed in the saddle of Hugh's horse. There were other horses in the Dutchman's corrals, and there was a rifle and cartridges in one of the packs aboard one of his mules. But in the meantime, there was a girl with dull dusky gold hair lying senseless upon the floor.

Hugh raced back across the room. He'd remembered Anne Evans somehow as a broad-shouldered girl, strapping and husky and self-reliant, only now as he knelt beside her, and saw the ooze of blood at the back of her head where she'd struck the corner of the window jamb in falling, he beheld, it seemed to him, a girl who was small and tiny and slender.

Gently, he gathered Anne up in his

strong arms and carried her into the bedroom off the kitchen. He heard his voice lift, inanely, "Hans! Dan Evans," and realized at once the idiocy of calling for help. For if old Hans and her father had been near, they'd have arrived long e'er this.

He flung himself back into the shattered kitchen for brandy from the cupboard and for hot water which had been steaming on the wood range in the corner. At the taste of the brandy, Anne opened her eyes and looked up at him dully, her hand moving to the wound at the back of her head.

"Injun Pete," she said. "I—I had to fire him three days ago. He came back today, drunk and on the prod, and forced his way into the cabin, and—" She seemed to forget what she'd started to say. For the first time recognition lit up her eyes. She murmured, "Oh, Hugh! Hugh! Thank God you came." Then she closed her eyes again, and drifted off into troubled, restless sleep.

In the absence of anyone to stay here with her, Hugh didn't dare leave her and set out on the two-day trip to Red Dog for a doctor. Neither did he dare to put her in the springless wagon and start out over the rough, rutted trail on a two-days' trek with her. Going out into the ranchyard, he unpacked his mules, got his rifle, came back into the cabin and kept the vigil at her bedside.

He wondered about what she'd said. *She'd* had to fire Injun Pete three days ago? Something deep and fierce and primitively savage welled up within him. Did that mean she'd been alone and in charge here for at least three days?

The hours ticked past. At first, a sense of hopeless inadequacy filled Hugh, a terror at having her here on his hands, being responsible for her until Hans and her father returned from—. Where? Where in heaven's name had the two men gone? And what had possessed both of them to leave at the same time? Then, gradually as he took her pulse at intervals, and brought her water when she awakened from time to time and complained of being thirsty, he lost his first feeling of terror. Wherever Hans and her father had gone, it didn't matter, he guessed. *He* was here.

Dawn came finally. Hugh Deering left the girl sleeping and went out to bring in firewood. Standing there, scanning the horizon for any sight of her father or Hans, he saw two horsemen silhouetted upon a ridge toward the east. Two motionless horsemen.

Saddling a pony, carrying his rifle in his lap, Hugh set out. When he'd approached within a quarter mile of the pair, one of the men put a Winchester to his shoulder. Flame spat. A bullet whistled. Hugh fired back. The two riders wheeled and rode off out of sight behind the ridge. He sent two more bullets blazing a warning over the ridge. Then he returned to the buildings, his bronzed young forehead furrowed. Injun Pete, he guessed. Injun Pete and a partner. Bad medicine, a drunken half-breed, with a grudge. . . .

He brought the wood in, tiptoed to the door of Anne's room. She was still sleeping, a little more restfully, he thought. He went out to attend to the stock in the corrals. On a trip to the well for water, he saw a tiny fenced plot and a fresh mound and a crude, homemade wooden cross. Going over to the cross, he read the name: "Daniel Evans," and the date, "February 3,"—three weeks ago.

Hugh took off his hat and stood there, silent grief for Anne Evans gripping him. Her father's death had been inevitable, he guessed. Dan Evans had been dying away back last fall. But Hugh guessed that that hadn't made it any easier for her. Poor kid. . . . When he came back into the house and started breakfast, he was choked and husky.

Standing by a window so that he could watch the ridge behind which the two riders had disappeared, he stirred the coals in the wood range. Anne's

voice called him presently from the bedroom. He found a napkin to make her breakfast tray look more attractive; took her coffee, crisp fried bacon, corn pone that he'd warmed in the oven.

He told her that he'd seen the cross out under the pines; said, "I'm sorry, Anne." And then while she smiled back at him bravely, and thanked him for his sympathy, he guessed that now was as good a time as any to get it over with—the duty which had brought him in here.

Smiling down at her, Hugh said, "And that brings up why I rode in here, Anne. With your Dad gone and everything, there's all the more reason for my—" It didn't sound very gallant. Not loving her, just feeling sorry for her and responsible for her, he couldn't make it sound very gallant, he thought. But he realized instinctively that he ought to do a little better than he was doing. He said, "I mean, regardless of your dad, Anne, I—I rode in here to ask you to marry me."

She didn't answer him. She was so still and quiet that he wondered whether she'd heard. Then she smiled at him. "That's sweet of you, Hugh." Her eyes closed and she turned her head away.

He stood there, unreasonable anger filling him for a moment. She was hurt and sick to be sure. But did she have to take it as calmly as all that? Couldn't she show any gratitude? Hadn't she any idea of what he was sacrificing? She didn't think, did she, that he enjoyed the prospect?

He moved over to the window cheeks purple, fists clenched. For a long, long while he watched the ridge where Injun Pete had disappeared. He thought how different it was, being married and being single. If he were single, he wouldn't wait restlessly, inactively, here while two half-breeds stalked his cabin. No sir! He'd go out like a man and carry the fight recklessly to the enemy! Did she know what she was doing to him? Turning him into a cautious, prudent, sensible old man! That's what marriage meant!

The moment spun itself out. Then after a long, long while there in the stillness, her voice called him again. Hugh heard her repeat, "That's sweet of you. But I—I— You see, I've promised Hans."

He turned, not getting it. "You've—"

"Promised Hans," she told him. She was smiling. Considerable color had come into her cheeks. She looked happy, radiant. She said, "I'm going to marry Hans Mueller, Hugh. That's why Hans isn't here. He left for Red Dog, yesterday morning, to bring the minister back with him."

Hugh stared at her. *"Hans left for Red Dog, yesterday morning, to—"* It was funny; it was odd. He felt the weight of a terrific load lift from his own shoulders. If she'd given old Hans such a promise, then that solved Hugh Deering's problems. Hugh Deering, in a day or two, would once more be free as the wind. Yet in spite of the happiness and the eery, almost incredulous sense of relief and reprieve that rolled up in him, Hugh felt something else, too. A sudden fury at old Hans. Hans, old widower of sixty-five? Hell, a lot of business a broken-down old grasshopper of that age had to ask a girl to marry him. Why, the man was in his dotage. He must be, to pull a fool stunt like this. Hugh heard his voice, barbed, edged, brittle: "Hans left you here all by yourself?"

She shook her head. "We thought I had Injun Pete to look after me."

Hugh snorted. It made him illogically furious at her now, too, to hear her standing up for Hans. "That's a lie," he told her, "and you know it. You told me last night, when you first come to, that you'd fired Injun Pete three days ago. So, if Hans left yesterday morning, he—"

The girl closed her eyes for a second. Her hand went in its last night's gesture of pain to her head. "Did I say that?" she asked Hugh. She lay there, forehead puckered as if she were trying to think. Then she said, "My head

hurts, Hugh. I guess Hans must have left longer ago than yesterday morning. I guess he must have left before I had to fire Injun Pete, because . . . ." She let her voice trail. Hugh saw that once more she had lapsed into unconsciousness.

He stalked angrily out of the room; banged the dishes in the kitchen as he washed them. Gold-digger, that was what she was! No girl would marry an ancient doddard older than her father except for his money.

"Yep," Hugh told himself, "she seen which side her bread was buttered on, all right. That weak pump of old Hans's will give way, one of these days, and she'll be a young widow with a nice, tidy little nest-egg." He tried to estimate what old Hans was worth. Old Hans had always lived simply and never put on any dog. "Prob'ly got plenty salted away. Plenty."

THAT long day passed. Twilight fell. Anne came out of her room, and although she looked tottery and weak, she insisted that the after-effects of whatever mild brain concussion she'd suffered had passed. Against Hugh's pleas and entreaties, she helped him get supper. They ate at the repaired kitchen table in silence. There in the lamplight, Hugh stole glances at her. She'd lost none of her tan through the winter. Her soft skin was the same lustrous gold as her hair. She was a pretty girl. A good, tall, substantial, well built, handsome girl. He could see her married to some strong, husky young rancher, but somehow he couldn't see her married to old Hans.

They did the dishes. Anne stood so close to him that once again a strand of her hair brushed across his forehead. Only, he hadn't the slightest urge to take her in his arms. He felt he loathed her. She went to her room. There wasn't any need, tonight, of Hugh's keeping a bedside vigil beside her, so he lay down on the floor in the kitchen, his rifle close beside him.

Only, after his sleepless night of the night before, he must have dozed off in spite of his resolve not to sleep, for, when he awoke with a start, he heard the crackle of flames outside; and the girl's footsteps were beating across the cabin floor.

Hugh bounded to his feet, flung himself across the cabin, in time to seize Anne before she could lift the heavy bar at the door. He swore at her. "You idiot, that's what Pete wants—for you to come out there, so he can—"

Anne fought back like a tigress. "But there's stock in the barn!"

"Leave it to me!"

Seizing his rifle, he used the barrel-tip at arm's length to unlatch the catch of one of the shutters, poke the shutter open. There was the instant tinkle of a broken pane, and the spat of a rifle bullet burying itself in the far wall. But he'd been ready. He ducked low, watching for the flash outside, and now Hugh Deering aimed as well as he could for the spot whither the flash had leaped. He missed, and for an instant lead all but grazed his cheek. He thrust a fresh cartridge into the breech and again fired, and this time in the rosy glow of the burning barn, he could see a figure stagger upright from behind the shelter of a little hummock and then pitch drunkenly into the grass. Anne knelt there at his side, poking a shotgun up over the windowsill. Hugh took the weapon from her, gave her his rifle.

"Don't poke your head up. Don't try to aim," he told her. "Jest keep blazin' away often enough to keep the hombre that's left out there blazin' back at the window here. I'm goin' out—"

The fingers of her hand clutched his arm. "But you told me—"

He felt a little thrill of something. He reassured her, and the promise to be cautious, somehow, didn't gall him. "I'm goin' out the back and sneak round the side of the house. I'll get him from the flank, see? As he rises

to blast up here, I'll shoot him. See?"

He darted to the back of the cabin. He opened the lean-to door. But he hadn't seen the man he'd only wounded circle the cabin on his hands and knees. Now as Hugh flung open the door, the man fired point-blank from a prone position a dozen yards off, and a bullet, pinking Hugh's shoulder, flung him back heavily against the door jamb. He let fly in return with both barrels of the shotgun. He blasted the wounded man literally into oblivion, but he had to pause now, to reload, and he'd given away his position. The breed Pete came leaping toward him round the corner of the cabin.

An explosion in Hugh's ear nearly deafened him. Injun Pete halted and wilted and dropped in his tracks, just as Hugh finished reloading. There at his side he saw Anne with the rifle. She'd rushed to the lean-to the instant the first shot had sounded there. From over his shoulder, she'd shot Pete. She swept on past Hugh now, into the open, flinging aside her needless weapon. Hugh rushed after her. She entered the blazing barn ahead of him.

He heard her voice, poised, calm, sure amidst the choking smoke. "I'm getting the brood mare. You get the stallion out of the box stall." The steadiness of her voice steadied him. His first impulse had been to overtake her, prevent her going into the smoke. But now he saw that she was quite as capable as he was. He felt close momentarily to a girl like that! A girl who could face peril as coolly as a man! He tore the iron pin out of the staple on the stallion's door.

He burst into the smoke-filled box-stall, dodging by instinct the murderous hoofs of the frenzied stallion. He ripped off his shirt and bandaged the beast's eyes; then he untied the halter rope from the manger ring, and pivoted the animal about. He reached the cool outside air. Anne already had the brood mare out. She was capable! She was tying the mare to a tree so that the animal couldn't return to the barn, and then she was rushing to the drain barrel under the eaves of one of the sheds. Burlap bags hung there. Anne caught up one, dipped it in the water. Hugh tied the stallion and was at her heels.

It was too late, now, to save the blazing barn. The barn's ridge-pole was crashing in a shower of sparks; but it wasn't too late to save the other sheds and the cabin.

HOURS and hours later, after the last blazing spark had been extinguished upon the last threatened roof, they faced each other, the two of them; Hugh Deering and Anne Evans, in the kitchen of the cabin, there in the pink light of the dawn. Hugh sat groggy and still in a chair while Anne bandaged his shoulder wound. He'd lost more blood than he'd thought. He wasn't going to pass out on her, but it felt good to sit down, and it was nice —nice and cozy and pleasant somehow —to have her here, ministering to him.

She smiled down at him. "There!" She crossed the kitchen to the stove.

Hugh watched her for a minute. Then he got up and crossed the kitchen after her. Coming up behind her, he caught her suddenly, roughly in his arms. Turning her, crushing her to him, he kissed her. And instantly he felt the open palm of her hand catch him violently across the cheek! She leaped back from him; fury, he thought, in her eyes. The words which had been on his lips died. He stared at her blankly. He'd been so close to her amidst the battle. He'd fancied that she'd been just as close to him. Only that was all it was, evidently, a mere fancy on his part.

He found his voice at last. Drawing himself up, cold, stiff, hurt, he said, "My mistake." Then his voice mounted angrily. "You'd still rather marry the old fool for his money than—"

Her eyes met his levelly. And he

wasn't sure, now, whether it actually was fury that he saw in the depths of the glacier blue eyes or not, but whatever it was it was strong and mighty and powerful. "That's right, Hugh. I'd still rather marry the old fool for his—" Her voice broke. The tears came into her eyes.

She turned back to the stove. He went back to his chair. She called him to breakfast; they sat there in silence, and he glared at her, hating her.

Then she said, "You can go out and pack your mules. I'll ride down the road a piece with you. The brood mare ought to be back under shelter again tonight. I'm going to take her to the Glendennings' in Sycamore Hollow. Then I'll get somebody from the Glendennings' to ride back here, and stay with me tonight until Hans shows up in the morning."

UGH DEERING sat there, that night, beside his campfire, and never before in his life had he known what it was to be lonely and not self-sufficient, but tonight the loneliness filled every inch of his bone and marrow like the winter frost. Tonight he wanted the companionship of—not a roistering crew of men; no, and not of the girl in the pink ballet skirt, whatever her name would be, for whom he'd buy champagne tomorrow night. He wanted the comforting presence here beside him of Anne Evans who'd been smiling down at him that day in the fall when he'd awakened in old Hans's great four-poster bed. He saw that it wasn't a recent decision in him or a whim born of the last two nights, either. It came to him that he hadn't turned into the Dutchman's lane, the other night, driven by the lash of a reluctant conscience, after all. He'd turned into the Dutchman's because all winter a girl with dull dusky gold hair had been with him in his dreams every moment of the day and night. He was in love, and he'd been in love for six months with—

With a cheap little gold-digger, who was marrying an old fool for his money? There in his heartache and his anguish and his loneliness, Hugh saw the light, he thought. Brave and staunch and lovely as Anne was, she couldn't be a gold-digger. There must be some other explanation. And perhaps it was this: He'd called Hans an old fool. Hans wasn't really. Hans was as fine and good as they came. So . . . It was all brightly clear, abruptly. After Anne's father had died, Hans had made the magnificently unselfish gesture of offering the girl marriage. Simply to make her rôle there in the cabin more secure. To protect her from gossip. Hugh saw why she'd stood by her bargain with Hans. Hans wouldn't have told her, of course, that his proposal was a mere gentlemanly gesture for her sake. She thought Hans loved her and wanted her, and she owed Hans everything, and—well, she'd be loyal to any promise she'd made him.

It was a little before midnight. Hugh cached his furs and his gear. Leaving his mules belled and hobbled and grazing, he saddled his pony. He flung himself aboard. He was off, back to the Dutchman's at a lope. This still could all be ironed out. It wasn't too late. He'd get to the cabin before Hans and the minister arrived. They'd have it out—he, Hans and Anne—in open and honest discussion. Hans would admit that the marriage was to have been a mere marriage of convenience. That would release Anne.

NINE in the morning Hugh drove his exhausted pony into the Dutchman's. The ranchyard was a hubbub of activity. Jim Glendenning from the ranch to the south and two of his sons were rounding up cattle, bringing them in from pasture. Ignoring Jim, Hugh flung

for the cabin. Anne wasn't there. He came back out to Jim Glendenning in a frenzy; and Jim told him:

"Anne? Why, Anne set out yesterday noon from my ranch with a guide to pack a hundred miles over the hills to the rail-head at Pine Bluff. I took her land and mortgages; paid her a couple of hundred dollars for whatever equity she's got left in the ranch and stock here, and she's headin' east."

Hugh stared at Jim Glendenning in numb, stupid bewilderment. "You paid her two hundred dollars for whatever equity *she's* got left in— But how could she—? I mean, where's Hans?"

And now Jim Glendenning stared at Hugh in amazement just as overpowering as Hugh's. "Hans? The Dutchman? Hell, didn't she tell you? Hans died last Christmas-time in Red Dog. That weak old pump of his give out one day while he was loadin' supplies outa the Beehive. Lived jest long enough to write a will, deedin' the girl and her dad the ranch, and—"

Only Hugh didn't hear the rest; that Hans had been buried in the boot hill in town and not brought back here to the tiny graveyard on his own property. Like a madman, Hugh Deering was back in the saddle. Hans had been dead since Christmas? Left, not a fortune, but a tiny debt-ridden property to the girl and her father? And the girl, alone and on her own, with only a drunken half-breed Indian to help her, had been trying to run that property since her father's subsequent death, three weeks ago? With pain in his heart like a knife, Hugh sank his spurs in his pony's sides.

She hated him, he guessed. She'd never really forgiven him for making love to her and leaving her last fall. So, when he'd ridden in, this spring, she had— He wondered for the instant why she'd gone to the preposterous length of inventing that lie about being engaged to Hans Mueller. Hans who'd been dead for months. Why hadn't she simply told him she hated him and loathed him and could never forgive him—in so many plain and honest words?

He rode hard and long and the land changed from grassy mountain meadows to gaunt, naked rim-rock. With the twilight that night, Hugh saw a campfire ahead of him. He felt no hunger, no thirst, no weakness from his shoulder wound; nothing but the fierce, driving necessity of persuading her that she mustn't hate him. He roared into the camp of Anne Evans and her guide, hurled himself from his horse.

Anne stood there, tall and tanned, with full broad shoulders and eyes of glacier blue and hair the dull dusky gold of the morning sun as it burned through a canyon mist. He came toward her slowly, penitently.

He said, "Anne, I love you, I love you. Don't hate me. Don't run away from me." He told her, "I want you and I need you and life'll never be the same without you."

And then abruptly he had her in his arms, unresisting. Her arms were slipping up round his neck. She was kissing him with the same frantic, desperate eagerness with which he kissed her. Kissing him, and crying, and telling him:

"But I don't hate you, Hugh. And I never did. Don't you understand? I thought you wanted to be free. And I— You didn't do anything terrible to me last fall, Hugh. But I thought I'd done something terrible to you when I made you so miserable and unhappy, and so I—"

Hugh Deering held her there, crushed close to him. And for the moment the eeriness and the stillness swept over him. For a moment he felt his old, old fear of taking upon himself the responsibilities of marriage. But it was a different fear this time. He wondered, not whether he wanted her, but whether he was worthy of her. She was all he'd ever dreamed of her and more. She'd have sacrificed her happiness to give him his. . . . He kissed her reverently this time and her young arms tightened about him.

Time to Take a Hand

By Eric Howard

Rod squares an old score by going to bat for a ranch kid—and his courage pays dividends in love.

ROD STEWART looked at the kid whose hands were linked together with the sheriff's handcuffs. He couldn't be more than eighteen, Rod thought, but there was an air of maturity about him. He was grave, silent, tight-lipped. He had jet-black hair; his face was deeply tanned, chiseled, hard, and he hadn't even been shaving long. His eyes were clear and keen. Rod liked his looks.

For an instant their eyes met. Rod's lighted up warmly. The kid looked surprised at finding a friendly glance in that crowd; then his gaze shifted and he looked at the sheriff. Rod also looked at the sheriff. The lawman was a big, pudgy, loose-lipped fellow, carelessly dressed in dirty, worn clothes.

Beside him stood an important-looking man in a tailored suit of tan whipcord, with a white Stetson on his thatch of gray hair. Rod had heard this man addressed as Mr. Grantby. He had seen him lean toward the sheriff and whisper something about the kid; the sheriff had grinned and nodded. It was clear enough, to Rod at least, that the sheriff respected Grantby and wanted his good opinion. It might be more than that; it might be that Grantby ran the sheriff's office.

From what he had heard, Rod guessed they had the kid dead to rights. Too bad. He was too young, too clean-looking, to be mixed up with the law. He looked like a kid who had spent most of his life far out on the range, away from towns and people.

It was none of Rod's business, of course. And, by rights, he should be on his way to the X Eye Ranch, where he had a job coming up. He needed the job. But he lingered, keeping his eyes open, listening.

It was bad. They had the kid for murder. It seemed he had gone into Grantby's place of business, at noon, when nobody was there but the old fellow who kept Grantby's books. Grantby had a big general store, with a kind of private bank and loan office on the side. The kid, they said, had tried to make the old bookkeeper open the safe; he aimed to rob the place. The old man opened it, all right, and dragged out a gun. The kid shot him through the heart before he could use it.

That was the story. The kid said nothing. If there was anything to be said on his side, he wasn't saying it. Grantby and the sheriff had been eating together, next door. When they heard the shot, they ran into Grantby's office. They captured the kid. He didn't put up a fight. That was because he was covered on two sides. And here he was, outside Grantby's store, handcuffed, about to be taken to jail.

A man in the crowd had started lynch talk. The dead man had been well liked, a good poker and whiskey companion. But Grantby and the sheriff squelched the talk and insisted that the boy be held for a trial.

Rod looked at the kid again. He was staring at Grantby—no, at a man beside Grantby. Rod followed his gaze. This man had just joined the crowd and had taken his place at Grantby's elbow. He was thin and wiry, dressed all in black—black trousers stuffed into black boots, a black sateen shirt and a black silk kerchief around his neck, a flat-crowned black hat. Rod looked at the gun-belt strapped around his lean waist. He wore a gun at his right side, but his left holster was empty. He had a disagreeable, thin-lipped smile on his face, and the brim of his hat was down to conceal his eyes.

"Bad hombre to meet up with on a dark night," thought Rod. "And a friend of Grantby, huh?"

Rod built a smoke. Could it be the kid was being framed? His memory took him back to a time when he had been in a jam like this, when he had stood in the kid's shoes. He hadn't talked, hadn't protested his innocence, any more than the kid. If it hadn't been for Bill Chisholm, who had stood by him, he would have gone the way the kid was going. He had always sworn that he'd square accounts, some day, by doing for somebody what Bill had done for him. That's all Bill had asked of him.

Rod shrugged his broad shoulders, dismissing thus the X Eye job. Then, as though no longer interested in the situation, he walked away. He glanced back once and looked the kid in the eye. He winked.

Old Johnny Jones, the grouchiest cook that ever burned biscuits in a Dutch oven, was standing in front of the little beanery he owned. He had on an apron that almost covered his slight, twisted body; and he scowled as he looked at the little crowd before Grantby's.

Rod started into the eating place. Jones ignored him until the sheriff led the kid prisoner off to jail, then spat into the street, and entered his place of business. Rod was sitting at the counter, reading the fly-bitten bill of fare. His hat was pushed back from his brown hair and there was a good-humored grin on his freckled face.

"What'll you have?" demanded Jones, irascibly.

"Some o' this cowboy's delight, as you call it," said Rod.

"Ain't got any. You can have ham and eggs, bacon and eggs, or just eggs."

"Whichever you got the most of," said Rod. "I ain't proud. Plenty of it is the main thing."

Jones grunted, sliced some bacon and dropped it into a skillet. "Ain't seen you around before, have I?" he asked.

"Reckon not. Got a job lined up on the X Eye."

"Good outfit. I cooked for 'em once."

"Yeah. You have many killin's here?"

"Not enough," said Jones.

Rod laughed. "That young feller don't look like a killer. But you can't never tell, can you? I guess the worst ones are them that don't advertise their meanness by their looks."

Jones slammed a plate of bacon and eggs down before Rod, grunted and said, "Coffee?"

"Yeah," said Rod, and fell to eating in silence. He knew the old cook was studying him, but he paid no attention.

"And he ain't a killer!" Jones exploded, after a few minutes of silence.

Rod looked up questioningly. "Huh? Who?"

"The kid—Dan Richards—the one you was talkin' about."

"Oh, him!" said Rod, as though he had forgotten the incident. He spread butter on a biscuit. "Looks like they got the goods on him."

Jones swore. "I ain't sayin' he hasn't good reason to kill. Mebbe he has. But he wouldn't kill a helpless old codger like George Mason. He'd pick an enemy."

"Such as?"

"Grantby, mebbe, or that slick gunslinger o' his, Blackie Drayne. There'd be some sense to his killin' one o' them."

"How come?"

The grouchy cook replied with a question. "You take me for an information burro?"

Rod shrugged and went on eating. He didn't look at Jones. He glanced out of the window. He saw the black-garbed gun-slinger, Blackie Drayne, ride past on a buckskin. Jones shook his fist at the rider and let out some pent-up profanity.

"You sound like you'd like to bite him," said Rod.

"Goin' out there to tell that poor kid of a girl her brother's arrested for murder! He'll like that, Blackie will. The blame sidewinder! And their father, as square a man as ever crossed the river, just three months dead! Accident! Yeah!"

"You say a lot o' words, but you don't make sense. Where's Blackie goin' and whose father is dead? But I forgot: it ain't my business and you don't feel like talkin'."

Jones growled deep in his throat. "Feel more like killin'," he muttered. "Doug Richards never died in no accident! They can't tell me. Found him mashed up in the bottom of a gorge, did they? Well, who put him there? Huh? And the kid, Dan, didn't kill George Mason. Shucks, they was friends. Prob'ly George was tellin' him something about Grantby—and Blackie shot him to shut him up. Yeah, they think the girl will give in, with Doug dead and Dan in jail. But she won't! No, sir! Not her! She's a Richards and she'll fight till Kingdom Come."

"Why is everybody jumpin' this Richards clan? Must be some reason."

"Plenty!" snapped Jones, and looked suspiciously at Rod. He said no more, but vented his indignation in muttered oaths.

"Do I go by the Richards' spread on the way to the X Eye?" Rod inquired, as he put down his coffee cup.

"Naw! It's out Gray Hills way. Why?"

"Too bad," Rod shrugged. "Like to see a gal with fightin' spunk. Next time I'm in town you can tell me all about it. Be seein' you."

Jones growled something as Rod strolled out. A little later the cook saw the cowboy ride past.

"Huh!" he said disgustedly. "Time was a young feller would take a hand in a game like this, just to keep the country fit for decent folks, just so he

could look at hisself in the mirror. The old breed's gone, I reckon."

He sat down and wondered what he could do to help Dan Richards and his sister, Kitty. He put Rod out of his mind. He would have been very much surprised if he had known that Rod had not turned off toward the X Eye, but had ridden straight on toward the Gray Hills, following the clear trail of Blackie Drayne.

ROD STEWART was thinking, meanwhile: "What's a job? Just somethin' to quit! But a gal with spunk, with the cards stacked against her—seems like a feller ought to take a hand. That kid looked all right to me. And this Blackie Drayne, I didn't care for that hombre."

Somehow, the whole situation seemed far more interesting than a mere job on the X Eye.

He halted at a small ranch house, a short distance back from the road, to inquire the way to the Richards' spread. A lantern-jawed man directed him, then said:

"Hear Dan killed a feller. High-tempered, them Richards. That don't pay around here. Drayne jest rode out to tell her. It'll sure break her up, on top the old man's death. Know what happened, stranger?"

Rod shook his head. "You know as much as I do."

"You goin' there?"

"Aim to. Why?"

"Nothin'." The rancher scratched his chin. "Drayne's admirin' of Miss Kitty. But mebbe you're a friend o' his."

Rod grinned. "Reckon you're tryin' to give me a hint o' warnin'. Thanks. Be seein' you."

He found the Richards' gate without difficulty, rode up the lane to the rambling stone and log house on a knoll. He saw Drayne's buckskin ground-hitched near the corral. He dismounted and walked up to the house. A woman who had been sitting on the veranda got up at his approach and stepped forward.

"Well, and who are you?" she demanded.

Rod looked at her and whistled. So this was Miss Kitty! She was a plain, hatchet-faced spinster of forty or more!

"Just my luck," said Rod to himself, and cleared his throat. "Just a cowboy huntin' a job. You Miss Kitty Richards, ma'am?"

"I'm Jane Richards, Kitty's aunt," she said in a snappy tone. "But there's no work on this wretched, ruined ranch. Since my brother died, since Dan . . . ." Her voice faltered. "Since gunmen molest us—"

Rod glanced at the buckskin. "Somebody botherin' you?"

"He thrust me outdoors, slapped me!" she said indignantly. "Said he wanted to talk to Kitty alone."

"Miss Kitty want to hear his talk?"

"Of course not!"

Rod moved swiftly to the door. Jane Richards caught his arm, whispered in terror: "Don't! He'll shoot you!"

Rod pushed her aside gently, swung open the door and stepped into the big living-room. Drayne was holding a girl in his arms, forcing kisses upon her; she was struggling against him, her cheeks crimson, her eyes dark with hate. She was fighting in silence.

"So you slap women, Drayne?" asked Rod, close to the gunman.

Blackie released Kitty, whirled toward Rod. His arm was a black streak as it moved to his gun. Rod struck him with his open hand, with both hands, first on one side, then the other. He hit him so fast and so hard that Blackie's head seemed to be revolving on his neck.

Pausing briefly, Rod snatched the gun from Blackie's holster—the one on his left side was still empty, and tossed it across the room. Then he resumed his exercise.

Blackie did not fight back, merely tried to ward off the blows. When his

hands were stinging and Blackie's face beet-red, Rod drove a straight punch to the point of his jaw. Blackie sank down.

Not until then did Rod look at Kitty. She was breathless, flushed, leaning against the wall. She looked like her brother Dan, but her face had the softness and the warm coloring of a girl. She was staring at him questioningly. Her eyes were puzzled.

"I'm a friend of your brother, Miss Kitty," Rod said. "Saw him in town, saw this feller leavin', thought he might bother you."

"Oh!" said the girl. "Thanks." Her eyes smiled. "You hit hard and fast."

Rod shrugged. "Gun-fighters can't stand up to fists," he said, "as a general thing. I didn't have a chance to talk to Dan—didn't want the sheriff and them to know I was his friend—so I don't savvy what's goin' on here. Mebbe you'll tell me."

He didn't wait for her reply. Instead, he bent over Blackie Drayne, removed the gunman's belt and used it to bind his hands behind his back.

"I'll tie his feet, too, if you got a piece of rope handy."

The girl went to another room and returned with a short length of lariat rope. Rod thanked her and bound the gunman's ankles.

"That'll hold him," he said, and built a smoke.

"Where did you know Dan?" she asked.

"Run into him in town and around, now and then," he said lightly. "Oh, we ain't old friends, but we always got along."

"I see," the girl nodded. "They've arrested him for shooting George Mason? Is that so? That's what Drayne said."

"Yeah." Rod went on to tell her what he had heard.

"Dan wouldn't shoot old George," she said. "One of them, Grantby or Drayne, killed George Mason. He was our friend, even though he worked for Grantby. He was telling Dan what Grantby was going to do to us now."

"Seems like Grantby has it in for you all," Rod said. "How come?"

"Yes." She hesitated, studying Rod, then said slowly: "It goes back a long time. Several years ago Dad needed a good deal of money in a hurry. He wanted to help an old friend who was in trouble. He borrowed from Grantby. Grantby didn't want the loan repaid. He did everything he could to keep Dad from getting back the money—rustling, robbery, everything. Then Dad's friend, the one he had borrowed the money for, paid him back. Dad started for town to pay Grantby. He never got there. He was found at the bottom of a gorge." She shuddered.

"He was totin' the money, in cash?" Rod asked.

"Yes, and it was gone."

"But his friend could have sworn he gave it to him. That would show he'd been robbed and that his death was prob'ly no accident."

"His friend died—heart failure, they called it—on the train going back to El Paso. The sheriff wouldn't believe what we said about robbery."

"So Grantby still has a lien on your spread?"

"Yes, and he plans to foreclose. He got rid of Dad—I'm sure of that—and now he has Dan in jail. Drayne said if I'd marry him, he'd take care of Grantby, get Dan out of jail, and we'd keep the ranch."

"Oh! Drayne's willing to double-cross Grantby, huh?"

"On those conditions, yes."

Rod glanced at the door, where Miss Jane Richards was standing.

"You haven't told him why Grantby wants the place," she said. "Oil!"

"Oil?" asked Rod.

"Yes," nodded Jane. "There's a bog out in the meadow that's black with oil. We've always known it. Doug, my brother, always said he'd never have an oil derrick on his ranch; he'd keep it cow country or nothing. Grantby's had geologists out here. They say it's rich with oil. That's why he wants it.

He's the richest man in town now. If an oil boom hits this section, he'll make a fortune. That's what's back of it, Mr.—"

"Rod Stewart, they call me. You're up against somethin', all right. Looks like Grantby will stop at nothin'. First thing, though, is to figger some way o' gettin' Dan out of jail." He glanced at the bound Blackie, who was staring at him hatefully. "What do you think, Blackie?" he asked.

"You'll never get him out!" Blackie snarled. "If he ain't hung, he'll be shot. You, too, you tramp!"

Rod laughed. "You won't do any shootin'," he said.

"Look!" cried Jane. "There's Dan!"

They heard the pounding hoofbeats as the boy rode up the lane. Kitty and Rod ran to the door. Dan was coming at a fast gallop, leaning low over his horse. He must have seen Blackie's buckskin and Rod's horse. He slid to a stop and swung down, with a gun in his hand. He halted suddenly, before the veranda.

Kitty ran down to him, put her arms around him. Dan held her, but eyed Rod warily.

"Blackie here?" the boy demanded.

"Yes," said Kitty. "He told me you were in jail, but your friend, Mr. Stewart—"

"Just who are you, cowboy?" Dan asked. "And what's the play?"

"Isn't he your friend?" asked Kitty.

"No! I never saw him before. Who is he? I don't trust anybody."

They were all staring doubtfully at Rod.

"How'd you bust jail, Dan?" Rod asked.

"Answer my questions!" Dan insisted. "Who are you? You claim to be my friend. Are you workin' for Grantby?"

"Dan!" Kitty protested. "He's acted like a friend! He fought Blackie Drayne and tied him in there."

"Maybe," the boy said grudgingly. "But I can't trust anybody. What's the idea claimin' you know me?"

"Well," said Rod, "I saw you was in trouble, I didn't like the looks o' the sheriff, Blackie and Grantby. I picked up some information around town and figgered mebbe you was framed. I just thought I'd take a hand. I felt real friendly toward you."

Dan eyed him suspiciously, but lowered his gun. "Looks like a lot to do for a stranger," he said. "Kitty, I killed the sheriff. Had to. They weren't goin' to hold me for a trial. Old John—you know who—brought me in a tray of grub. Had a gun on it, covered up. The sheriff was standin' there, in the front of the cell, tellin' me I'd better eat hearty, it might be my last meal. I found the gun, threw down on him. I told him to put his hands up. I didn't want to kill him. He went for his gun, fired at me—see this hole in my shirt—and I knew I'd have to get him and get away before Grantby and others got there. Now—they'll be comin' for me. I've got to keep goin'."

"Oh, Danny!" Kitty moaned.

The boy patted her arm. "Pack me some grub," he said. "I'll saddle my best horse. Any of the boys here?"

"No, they're up at the pass. I was afraid there'd be more rustling."

Dan nodded. "That's right. But there ought to be some of 'em here to look after you and Aunt Jane. If Grantby comes—"

"I'll stay here," offered Rod.

"You! I ain't sure yet you ain't workin' for Grantby. Everybody else is."

Rod grinned. "If I was," he said, "I'd disarm you and hold you for him. How much you think that'd be worth to him?"

"A thousand, at least."

"Lot o' money for a poor cowboy. Sure a temptation."

"You think you could disarm me?"

Rod had stood, poised on the edge of the veranda. Jane Richards was near him. He grinned to himself. Better show the kid a thing or two, he decided.

He plunged forward in a long dive, under Dan's gun, which he couldn't use without risk to his aunt, and caught the boy with his shoulder, his arms around his legs. Dan fell backwards. Rod's hand closed on his wrist. Jumping away, he wrenched his gun out of his grasp.

Dan stood up, breathless, fearless, ready to fight.

"So you *are* workin' for Grantby!" he cried.

Rod laughed. "No, just showin' you that I'm not," he said. He held the boy's gun by the barrel, offered it to him.

Dan stared for a moment, then accepted the gun. A smile broke over his stern face.

"I'm a danged fool, stranger," he said. "I'm ashamed o' myself. I ought to be proud to have you for a friend. You come at me like a streak o' lightnin'."

"Go saddle your horse, son," said Rod. "Miss Kitty, make up a pack o' grub. He'd better not be here when Grantby shows up. Where you plan to go?"

"There's a cave up above here," Dan said, "where I can hole up. I could hold off an army there."

Rod nodded. In a little while, after embracing his sister and his aunt, and shaking hands with Rod, the boy rode off. Rod unsaddled the wet horse he had ridden from town and stabled the animal. Then he went into the house, picked up Blackie and carried him out to the barn. He gagged him and tossed him into the hay.

KITTY was standing alone on the veranda when he headed back, whistling.

"I don't know why you're helping us," she said, "but, thanks! No one else could do what you've done. Blackie has everybody scared, but you don't know what fear is."

"Me?" Rod grinned. "I'm tremblin' in my boots right now. That feller Grantby has a bad eye. I'm afraid of him, all right. Hear me whistlin'? Like a kid in the dark."

Her eyes glowed warmly. She smiled. Then she shook her head. "I don't know where you came from or how you happened to come just now," she said. "But you're our good luck. The first we've had in a long time."

"I've been called a jinx," said Rod. "And other names. I'll tell you, Miss Kitty. I blew into town yesterday, lined up a job on the X Eye. I aimed to go out there when I saw Dan gettin' arrested. Once I was in a tight spot like that, myself, and a feller helped me out. I talked some to old Johnny Jones. I didn't let on, but I figgered mebbe I'd better take a hand. Johnny allowed you're a fightin' girl with spunk; he didn't let on you was beautiful, besides. Or that you had an oil well out in the pasture."

"There will never be an oil well there," the girl said. "Dan and I feel as Dad did. This is cow country. We don't want our range littered up. The oil's been there for a million years, I guess, and it can stay there. We can make a go of the ranch, if they'll let us."

Rod nodded. That's the way he would have felt about it if the ranch had been his.

"You and Miss Jane better go in the safest room in the house and stay there. Let me talk to Grantby."

She protested that she would help him fight them off.

"Mebbe there won't be a fight," he said. "You let me handle it."

It was not long before a cloud of dust informed them that Grantby and his men were approaching. With the sheriff killed, it had probably been natural for Grantby to take charge. He had a posse with him, and it was no doubt his intention to hunt down and kill Dan.

At Rod's insistence, the girl and her aunt went into a thick-walled, rear room. He saw to it that they had six-

guns, two rifles, and ammunition. He cautioned them to remain hidden and silent.

Then he went out and sat down on the veranda, with two sixguns in his belt, a rifle close to his hand.

"I better play dumb," he said to himself. "That's quite a flock o' men behind Grantby."

The men spread out as they neared the house. Grantby rode straight toward Rod. He looked at him for a moment, recalling that he had seen him in town.

"Where's that damned killer, young Richards?" he asked.

"Huh?" said Rod. "You mean the kid, Dan? Why, him and the women folks went off over the pass. Allowed they was headin' for Central City."

Grantby slapped his horse's neck, swore. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Me? I work here, mister. They pay me wages for lookin' after the place while they're gone. Seems like some bad hombre named Grantby is after 'em. Ain't safe for 'em here. So they lit out. They aim to wire the governor from Central City and have him send help. This Grantby feller is tryin' to steal this ranch. You the sheriff, mister? What you mean callin' Dan a killer? You don't mean to tell me I'm workin' for a killer!"

"He killed the sheriff!" snapped Grantby. "I'm takin' charge. I'm Grantby!"

Rod gave a ludicrous exhibition of surprise. "Gosh," he said, "I spoke out o' turn."

"You did. If you're as dumb as you look, I'll let it pass. They filled you full of lies. You're a stranger here, I take it. Well, move on, waddy. We're goin' to search this place. And if you've lied to me, you want to pray."

Rod stood up and leaned against a pillar.

"No," he said slowly, "I ain't movin'. I was hired to stay here. No call for you all to search the place. You ain't the law."

"Aw, shoot the poor dumb coot, boss!" said a man near Grantby.

Grantby stood up in the stirrups. "Pile off, men, and search the buildings. Dan may be hidin' here. They may have Blackie here."

Rod let out a bellow of laughter. "Blackie Drayne!" he shouted. "Why, I run him out! That little yaller dog won't stop till he hits the Border. He got ornery and I slapped the meanness out of him. Now, listen, gents. I'm hired to look after this spread while the folks are away. They told me particular to look out for a crook named Grantby. I don't know the rights of it but I'm doin' what I was hired to do. How do I know you won't bust everything up, mebbe start fires? No, you don't search these buildin's. You better ride."

While defying them, Rod had maintained his air of stupidity. He seemed to have only one idea in his head: to do what he had been hired to do. He was counting on his knowledge of men; they wouldn't hate a man as pitiably stupid as he seemed to be. He was also counting on what he had said about Blackie carrying weight.

But a swaggering youngster in the crowd, perhaps eager for Grantby's approbation, snapped his gun out and fired at Rod. The bullet struck the pillar he leaned against. He moved swiftly but easily back of that stone pillar. A gun leaped to his hand. He fired. The hot-headed youngster yelled in pain, holding up a shattered hand.

Rod laughed. "Don't make me mad, gents. There's only fifteen of you, includin' Grantby. I reckon I could get six or seven 'fore anything happened to me. I'd bet on that. Some o' you may be square shootin' men. To you I'm sayin' this: Grantby and the sheriff framed Dan Richards; Dan didn't kill that old feller in town; Blackie Drayne did; and Grantby's a dirty crook. That's whatever. Now, ride or fight!"

Grantby, in a sudden rage, jerked out a gun, leaned low over his horse and

fired at Rod. But when Rod's bullet tore his hat from his head, Grantby whirled his horse and retreated.

"Look at the yaller buzzard run!" Rod chortled. "Follow the leader, boys!"

Grantby did not stop until he was a few hundred yards away. There he pulled up and beckoned to the others. They conferred for a time, and Rod observed that there was dissension in the ranks. They could still surround the buildings and enter them. He lifted the rifle to his shoulder. A hawk flew by above, high, moving fast. He brought the rifle up, fired. The hawk fell half-way between Rod and the group of men.

They rode slowly off, with Grantby following, not leading. Rod grinned and walked into the house. He paused at the door of the room where Kitty and Jane were. He told them the men had gone.

"I heard it," Kitty said. "I saw them. But you shouldn't have taken such a chance."

"It was them, not me, takin' chances. I might 'a' killed 'em. I sure hope Dan stays in that cave. They'll probably come back by dark. Grantby's yaller, but he won't give in while he can get anybody to fight for him. Well, you stay here. I'll keep watch."

THEN ROD returned to the veranda, tilted a chair against the wall, and built a smoke. Soon he made out a rider approaching from town. Rod didn't move until the man turned up the lane.

It was the old chuck-wagon cook, Johnny Jones. He looked at Rod in astonishment.

"What in time you doin' here?" he demanded. "Thought you said you was goin' to the X Eye. Did they get Dan?"

Casually, Rod told him what had happened. The old man's eyes opened.

"You slapped Blackie down? You run off Grantby and them?" He put out his hand. "Man alive, I didn't know they came like that any more! And I thought all you was good for was eatin'!"

"You remind me I'm hungry. S'pose you go in there and stir up a mess. Miss Jane and Miss Kitty could likely help you."

"I shore will, cowboy!" said Johnny Jones. "But what will you do when Grantby comes back?"

"Cross that arroyo when we get there. I figger he won't have so many with him. Some of 'em will go back to town. If the kid stays in that cave—Damn!"

Johnny Jones followed his gaze. Grantby and at least half of his followers were returning. And it was plain, even at that distance, that they had a prisoner.

Johnny Jones spoke slowly. "I guess the kid couldn't stay away, safe. Got to worryin' about Miss Kitty, same as I did. Had to come down. And they nabbed him."

"Yeah. Looks like they're goin' to stop by that cottonwood along the wash. By the jinks, they're goin' to—"

"Lynch him!" said Johnny, as Rod ran down to the corral. "What you aim to do?"

"Make a trade, mebbe!" Rod called. "I told 'em I'd run Blackie off. I got him in the barn. I'll take him out there and try to make a deal—trade prisoners. You stay here!"

Rod plunged into the barn, jerked the gag from Blackie's lips, carried him out and put him on his buckskin. When he mounted his own horse, he had a lead rope on his saddle, tied to the buckskin's bridle.

Blackie rode ahead. Some of the men near the cottonwood saw his horse and spoke to Grantby. They all stared. Rod jerked the buckskin to a halt at a high point. Now he could clearly see the kid, bound, under the limb that Grantby intended to use.

"Hi, Grantby!" Rod called. "I'll swap with you. Let Dan go and I'll give you this little rattler. You do

anything to Dan, I'll do the same to Blackie."

For a time there was no response to his suggestion. He grinned at Blackie.

"Your friends don't want you, feller. They'd just as soon I killed you. Better speak up."

"Go ahead, boss," Blackie shouted. "Make a deal with him."

After further delay, Grantby called his agreement. Rod made the conditions. They were to release the men on signal. Grantby was to let Rod and Dan return to the house before firing a shot.

At the signal, Blackie rode forward, Dan rode toward Rod. They passed each other midway. Then a man beside Grantby fired at Dan's back. The boy swayed in the saddle, almost fell, but clung on; his horse plunged forward.

Rod swore and lifted his rifle. The rifle ball sang a death song—for Blackie Drayne, whose horse carried him right up to Grantby and dropped him at Grantby's feet.

Dan came on, wounded, and tightly bound. A roar of rage from the mob behind pursued him.

"Get to the house!" Rod yelled. "Kitty needs you! Ride!"

Dan shook his head stubbornly. Rod brought the lead rope down across his horse's flanks and the animal raced toward the ranch house.

Grantby's men were coming now. Rod stood his ground, raised the rifle, fired again and again.

A bullet from a sixgun shattered the rifle stock. Rod dropped it. His sixguns spoke. If he turned and fled, he'd be shot in the back. He'd better stand up to them, fight them off, cut them in two before they charged the house. If he could get Grantby. . . .

Horses fell, men pitched to the ground. But they came on.

And then, suddenly, Rod felt strangely dizzy. He didn't know what had happened, but he had struck the ground. His horse had run back toward the barn.

All about him, then, a battle seemed to be raging. He was lying prone; he couldn't see; but the din was terrific.

Then, after a time, there was silence, utter silence—except for someone sobbing close to him.

Dimly, he heard voices. Young Dan's voice, especially, saying: "I didn't go to the cave. I went up on the pass, got the boys, told 'em to follow me down. They was comin' when Rod here made his dicker with Grantby."

"We sure cleaned 'em up!" Johnny Jones chortled. "Caught 'em between two fires! With the boys ridin' down on 'em, with us comin' this way—Gosh, I couldn't hold Kitty back when she saw Rod drop!"

That was it, then, Rod thought. Dan had summoned the cowboys from the pass. Kitty and Jane and Johnny Jones had come from the house. Grantby and his men had been caught between them. From the silence, he knew Grantby's men had been subdued.

"Grantby's dyin'," Johnny Jones went on, "and admittin' he killed Doug and tried to frame you, Dan. You won't have no more trouble!"

Then why was anybody sobbing? Rod couldn't understand. He reached out, blindly, and his hand closed over a small, firm, warm hand.

"Don't cry," he murmured.

Arms encircled him, lifted him up, and a warm cheek was laid against his own. He felt the pressure of soft lips. Through a blur of pain he looked into the glowing, misty eyes of Kitty Richards.

"I ain't a prophesyin' man," said Johnny Jones, "but it don't take a fortune-teller to know you're goin' to have a red-headed brother-in-law, Dan. Let's tote him up to the house where Kitty can nurse him proper. Then I'll cook up a mess o' somethin' and we can have a fiesta."

One Little Red Horse

By Kingsley Moses

For the love of a man and a maid Red pits his nimble horse sense and his brave equine heart against treachery and bared knives.

"TWO FENCE posts close together don't rot and fall the same night," Old Ed King growled at his granddaughter. "Huh? You say you don't think they was rotted? Well, I know dang well they wasn't. Busted down, shore! And that'd be Kime's gang!"

"Yes; but what's the idea? Kime may be plumb ignorant, but he's surely not so dumb he thinks he can run us out."

"Har-oomp!" The tough old wampus snorted from his wheel-chair there on the front porch. "Run us? I won't be alive. They'll run you!"

The slight, pretty girl with the honey-colored hair, parted in the middle under the coronet of braid, just smiled tolerantly. "Now, Gramp, forget the funeral talk. You'll last a long, long time, even if you are crippled up some. Hello, what's this?"

A rider, dusty and tired, on a heavy dun mare, had drifted up to the three-foot rock wall which protected the Kings' front yard. This little patch of green lawn and bright-hued garden, at odd contrast to the yellow brown of all those Western hills, was Ruth's pride. She had even a little pool there, with a couple of pink pond lilies. "Hey,

stop that!" the girl exclaimed, but not to the stranger on his dun mare. The ejaculation was addressed to the nimble red colt which had whipped around from behind the mare's bulk, and with an easy leap come right over the wall, cactus fringe and all.

"You, Red!" barked the stranger too.

The pretty colt—rising two years he looked—only gave an almost impudent glance behind him as he sunk his alkali-stained muzzle into the lily pads. He certainly was thirsty.

The girl had to smile. The small, neat hoofs had not scarred her precious grass much anyhow. "The mare—and you—look as if you could do with a drink, too. But our stock mostly waters round back at the trough."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," the rider removed his hat. Distinctly handsome he was, with a finely modeled head and close-cut chestnut hair. "Red there lives up to his name, sort of anarchist-like. But, like most other Reds, he's just sort o' sassy, not dangerous. Hey, get outa there, you pink souse. Want to founder yourself?" The pink souse whickered, and flew back over the wall as easily as a quail lifts.

"A dang purty li'l' hoss," mumbled Mr. King. "Say, stranger, you lookin' fer work?" Ruth guessed correctly he was more interested in the colt than in hiring the man.

"You read my inmost thoughts, mister," the lean rider grinned; but a little ruefully. "I'm scarcely worth my keep. I've been a spell in the hospital. Just beginnin' to get around."

"Bright's disease, consumption, ep'lepsy er botts?" boomed the tough old ranchman. A hopeless cripple from arthritis himself his favorite amusement was reading the medical columns in all the papers.

"Nope. Nothin' but a plain busted leg—rodeo stuff."

"Har-oomp! Trick rider, eh? Show-off! You fancy dudes cain't scarcely earn their keep."

"Yeah, I can just about do that." Bad right leg hanging straight down, the man grinned without resentment. "Was even with a circus summers. You'd might as well know all my crimes. That's how come little Red's so fresh—like master like hoss."

"Well, you ain't got no inferiority complects none. You're hired. Show 'im his stall, Ruthie."

IT WAS not the sound of a shot which wakened Ruth King in the darkness. But it was so like the sound of a shot that anyone but a girl who had been born and raised on a ranch might easily have been fooled.

But Ruth, daughter of the range, could identify that sound accurately. There wasn't much K Slash stock left after four bad summers; even the precious water, once so plentiful, was failing. But Ruth hadn't forgotten the days before cattle were fenced when the smack of a poncho on a steer's hide was a noise familiar enough.

"Rustlers!" she breathed, rolling out of her bed and into her levis and boots with almost the same motion. She remembered the broken fence posts.

"Grandpa," she started to call. No use, the old war-horse now was entirely helpless. No light from under his door either; in the heavy sleep of his age he had not even heard the sound.

Who would be in the bunkhouse? Nobody. Patterson and Whitey were at the loading chute a hundred miles away, shipping a few head of stock to get the ready money the K Slash so sorely needed. Brady would be down at Kime's Desert Tavern as usual, drunker than a boiled owl. She was into her shirt of butternut flannel and heavy leather vest before she remembered Kermit Stone, the newly hired hand. He was lame but. . . .

He wasn't too lame to have come awake and got busy. By the haggard light of an old moon she could see him

there by the shed, saddling up his tall dun.

"You heard 'em! Can you ride?"

"Enough," was all he said. "Where's your pony? I'll saddle it."

"No need." She'd yanked her own pet pinto out, a plump four-year-old. "Ride him slick." With only the rope of the halter in her fingers she had vaulted onto his back. The new hand, scrambling, was after her.

"Could you figure which way they went?" she threw back over her shoulder. She hadn't bothered with a hat; had had no time to bind her hair up; it streamed behind like a misty pennon.

"West," he spurred to keep up with her. "To the Paiutes."

Rustlers they'd be, sure enough; and once they got into those mountains, trackless, mostly unknown to man, rising to the highest peak of the whole United States. . . . Wordless the pair galloped on, though alert ears could not catch the slightest sound of the man-made stampede ahead.

Where the slit of Snake Cañon showed between blacker bulking mountains, the girl swung her pinto sharp to the left. With the man close behind they pounded up the twisting arroyo through tumbled rocks and greasewood. Indistinguishable to human eye, the horses could yet discern which was stone and which was desert weed; and rarely did either stumble.

Warned at last by their mounts' labored breathing, the pursuers pulled to a slower pace as they continued to work upward. They could determine by the stars that their course continued roughly westward, though they had to stick to the tantalizing twistings of the cañon as the towering shoulders of the Paiutes rose steeply on either side.

"They got any hide-out you know about?" the man spoke.

"There's a wash runs off to the right somewhere round here. Comes down from Medicine Mesa. There's water there in sumps and bogs where they could hold stock easy."

"Good enough."

Their upward progress now was a little easier. Winter torrents had sluiced the wash clear of even the persistent grease bush; and boulders, distinct in outline, were simpler to avoid. Mostly at a running walk the two riders continued; both keenly alert for any alien sound.

Ruth did not analyze her feelings; altogether too angry for that. For a girl and a half-crippled man to try to ride in on an unknown number of rustlers would have seemed a foolhardy job. The girl never even considered that; or, if she did, she had only the thought that rustlers, around here anyway, wouldn't be crazy enough to fight. The whole King clan had been widely known and liked; the K Slash one of the oldest brands registered in the county. If it did come to a fight—stranger though this young man was, somehow she trusted him.

Yet neither had slightest warning as spears of light lanced through the darkness.

Immediately by Ruth's ear, before she could yank out her own weapon, Kermit Stone's .44 thundered.

"Off your horse," he yelled excitedly.

At the same time his own horse went down. He jumped clear, stumbling and limping. His mare, staggering, got up again; started to plunge away.

The man made a grab for the bridle as the scarlet streamers of flame spat out around them. Then, perceiving the girl still astride, let his horse go and unceremoniously yanked her from her seat.

Just in time! Screaming, the pinto reared and went clear over backward. He did not get up.

The girl had not been gently unseated. As a matter of fact she hit on elbow and hip, sprawled and rolled amid hard rocks and scrub piñon.

Murderous arrows of fire came slanting down from above; and the explosions of the shots and the shrill whine of ricochetting bullets filled the girl's ears with confusion. But she had

her gun in her hand, was trying to point and level it.

Some big bulk lay in the way; a dark solid outline. A boulder? Ah no, her pet pinto. Done for, poor little cuss! Grimly the girl sighted and fired at the nearest flash.

No answering spurt of flame came immediately. She seized the opportunity to lift herself slightly and look for her companion.

"Oh, stranger," she called. "You, Kermit, where are you?"

"Present and accounted for." An arm lifted not five yards away. "Your pony dead? Mine's strayed. Stay down."

Almost as if they had heard and knew that the unequal fight was even more in their favor, the drygulchers' fire re-opened. For a space neither man nor girl dared rise ever so slightly for a sight. A downhill charge by the foe might be expected any instant.

Luckily not yet, though. Brave enough, while themselves concealed, the bushwhackers had no stomach for a frontal attack. Their fire slackened and ceased.

And now across the desert to the east the palest hue of gray crept up into the sky. There was as yet no roseate tint of dawn; but the dark blue dome of the heavens was tinged almost imperceptibly with wan, milky light. The tired moon grew dim. Scattered piñons appeared in their true pyramidal form; and the fragments of pebbles in the gravel assumed distinct outline. Attack from the rear would be out of the question soon for the wash sloped steep and open behind them. To their left a towering butte, streaked with opalescent silicate, began to catch the light.

Ruth saw her companion cautiously poking up his black sombrero on the butt of his revolver. An old trick to draw fire. Nothing occurred.

"Well, danged if I don't believe the skunks have skunked away!" Young Stone got to his knees; not without effort. The fall had not done that bad leg a bit of good.

Uphill there was not a sound. Alarmed, no doubt, by the arrival of day the thieves had slipped away noiselessly. To check any hot pursuit of the stolen stock had apparently been their mission. That accomplished, and the cattle by now miles away, the hazards of a real fight no longer appealed to the rogues.

"Well?" Young Stone smiled at her, though his thin face was grayish. "We walk home."

"Yes." Then she looked up at him. She was on one knee by her dead pony. "But first we bury Paint-Pot here."

Kermit Stone looked up at the opalescent heavens. Far, far aloft already four black shapes sailed and wheeled. The buzzards, the moment they left—and the mangy dog coyotes. . . .

"It's right nice o' you to feel that way, Miss King."

"Guess it can be 'Ruth' and 'Kermit.'"

He nodded gravely and instantly set to work. The problem of some sort of grave was not, even without tools, too difficult. Rocks were piled loosely all around in that gravelly wash. These could be dragged and rolled over the body of the little paint horse without too severe effort. Silently the two labored. Beyond the desert buttes a scarlet sun bulged.

A big rock with a concealed split came away more easily than Kermit had calculated. The lame man staggered and caught his balance with an effort, bringing down around him a miniature landslide of loose shale and gravel.

Something in the flakes of the rocks thus exposed caught his quick attention. He went on his knees to scoop up some fragments and examine them closely.

Ruth saw what he saw too.

"Gold! And nuggets—not dust!"

He nodded; but hardly dared speak out for a whole minute. Then breathed in no more than a whisper: "Yes; and a rich paystreak."

An hour's intensive exploration indicated truly that this was no trifling

pocket. A narrow cleft in the rocks ran for a hundred yards straight up the butte. In all the crannies of this crevasse flakes of gold were to be found. Somewhere within pistol shot must lie a mother lode. Sheer chance, which had seemed so disastrous, had beckoned them to a fortune.

Ruth, even in the thrill of her incredible good luck, would not give over the duty of burying her paint pony. But by the time this labor was accomplished, and their new claim had been monumented in orthodox fashion with pyramids of stone, the sun was past its zenith, and both man and girl were wearied to utter exhaustion. Toilsomely, almost without word, they plodded their way home.

Greatly to their surprise, while yet a mile from the clump of cottonwoods which shadowed the ranch house, out came the red colt galloping to meet them. His muzzle went right into the front of Kermit's shirt, popping all the buttons.

"Why, you darn little cuss, who let you out of the stable?"

"That drunk idiot, Brady, would've come back and let him loose," Ruth laughed. "But only into the corral, I'd think."

"The corral has a slide-bar gate, I noticed."

"Sure, like most all fences here."

"Well, a slide-bar's just duck soup for Red. He opens 'em; *and* shuts 'em—which is a lot more unusual. Regular circus horse I was trainin' the youngster to be; walk a plank, untie knots, get his own feed o' grain."

"Oh, won't he be fun! Can I ride him now—now poor Paint-Pot's gone?"

"You took the words outa my mouth, Ruth."

Impulsively she vaulted onto the bare back. Red pranced easily but gently. Evidently he didn't mind such a burden.

"I see where you've got you a pet," Kermit smiled happily. This was a girl! Certainly did wish he could give her a whole lot more than a pony!

Ruth, in her own mind, was thinking this was quite a man too. Weak from the hospital, and limping, he'd never let out one yip.

"You and I, Kermit," she said, sliding off the red colt, "are, well, business partners now. Let's go about our business and say nothing to Gramp. Gramp's a lamb; but a talker! He tells all he knows and then some."

"Right. We'd do well to keep this quiet a while."

"You let the colt carry you in." She saw how white his lips were.

"No, I can make it all right." And, with that, abruptly sat down as his played-out leg failed him.

THREE days it was, therefore, before the new K Slash hand was strong enough to tackle the new prospect again. But the time, for all their eagerness, went fast enough as with constant association their sense of intimacy grew. The red colt with his smart ways was a continual delight, too. He had, as he loved to demonstrate, worked the slide-bar with the greatest of ease.

Hardly indeed were the girl and young man separated except when she rode into town to file on the "Paint-Pot," named after the pinto whose death had revealed the wealth so accidentally. Samples at the assayer's showed a richness they hardly dared dream. To work their claim and begin to cash in so that they could purchase machinery for real mining was the routine they set themselves.

Dawn of the fourth day found them back at the arroyo, equipped with picks and shovels, and with a pack horse carrying water enough for primitive panning. Kermit's dun mare had drifted back, of course; but Ruth was forking little Red. The colt carried her slim weight easily.

They worked up the wash; passed the pinto's rough grave. Here was the cleft in the rocks running up to the

butte. And not the slightest sign of their location markers!

Not at any of the four corners was there slightest trace of a monument. It was as if the pyramids of stone, so carefully erected, had never been there at all. Easy to guess what had happened.

"But what they allow to get by that," snorted Kermit, "passes me. You've filed legal, and located. They're just wastin' their work, the sneakin' sidewinders!"

"Maybe. But it doesn't look any too good, Kermit."

"Why not? It's ours. Let's hop to it." He helped himself to a spade.

As the second shovelful was tossed out onto the square of clean canvas, which they'd brought along to hold their samples, something hit the man's spade. A rifle had spoken above them.

In broad daylight then the enemy had returned? A bolder, tougher gang than the lawful owners had suspected. But the lure of gold presses harder than the mere possession of a few ganted cattle.

Man and girl threw themselves flat while yet the first shot reechoed among the craggy mountain steeps.

Little Red sagaciously did likewise. With a disgusted snort he stretched prone. But again, of course, the dun mare bolted, cumbersomely followed by the pack horse.

No time now for thinking of that. From a semi-circle above, the shots began to lash home. Happily all three, pony as well as the two humans, had the protection of the butte on one side, and the cover of a slight hollow. Always difficult to shoot accurately at a down angle, the gang's fusillade had little effect.

An odd change in the sky was making accurate aiming no easier. The high heaven, so turquoise blue only a few minutes before, was now blotched directly above by a huge, balloon-like cloud which darkened toward its center.

"Cloudburst." Ruth looked up, careful not to expose herself.

"Would help," Kermit agreed.

Yes, it would sure be a help. Not even the toughest hombre is likely to wish to operate in the cataract-like flood of a real Western cloudburst. It is as if a hole at the top of the sky were suddenly opened and the water released not in drops but in whole heavy-hitting barrelfuls. A man, under that opaque deluge, is drenched, blinded and battered to earth. If the cloud did collapse. . . .

Aloft the attackers recognized the threat, too. Evidently lowering their sights, their rifle balls kicked gravel from the very lip of the slight hollow where man and girl lay prone; from the glittering silicate of the butte at their side bullets zinged shrilly. A metallic "tink" told that one bullet had ticked Kermit's spur.

They were getting the range too accurately. Only the fortunate fact that they had no good cover in the wash prevented the enemy fire from becoming deadly.

How many assailants they faced, the beleaguered couple could not know. There seemed to be four or five of them, judging from the diversity and direction of their shots.

If the individuals of the gang could summon up nerve to charge they would likely overpower the defenders. But one or two of the miscreants would most assuredly be dropped. Overhead the baleful cloud hung.

"The minute the rain lets loose we better fade," Kermit counseled. "We collect no antes for lingerin'; and we got the law on our side. If we can get in to the court-house Sheriff Sims will back us up. If he's the man you say he is, Ruth, he'll run these crawlin' claim-hoppers from hence to hereafter. Look out; there she comes!"

With a sound like a tearing sheet the water slashed down.

"Up, Red!" the girl cheered. The three rose together.

They had timed their move artfully. Under the first fierce swoop of the cataract from heaven the impetuous charge

of the thieves was beaten down. Red, galloping between man and girl, went headlong down the wash's declivity.

It did seem for a moment, as tardy bullets shrilled above them, that they had a good chance to escape. Only a few more strides to where hanging rock projected—

Then, without a word, pitching forward, Kermit Stone went on his face.

"Kermit!" The girl bent over; seized him under the arms; wrenched him to the rocks' shelter.

The wounded man heaved upward. Blood oozed from his lips. "Got me, honey," came through the red-stained lips. "K-keep down, dear."

Cannily the little red horse had swerved backward to join them, although the ordinary range bronc would have rushed on, panicked.

And panic, iced by cold fear, was in Ruth's heart, too. Arms trembling, she tried to lift the cruelly wounded man.

"No, don't bother 'bout me," the blurred voice muttered. "Red'll carry you. Get sheriff." Blood choked him.

"No, I'll get a doctor," was the impulsive answer. "Look, maybe you can hold 'em off, Kermit, lying here."

A bit of luck favored. Almost where the man had fallen two boulders reared with just enough room between them for a prone man to lie. If Kermit could keep consciousness, and shoot at all, he could hold off the enemy indefinitely.

"I don't want to leave you," Ruth whispered. "We've come to be pretty good partners."

"Bless you, honey." His hand was on hers. "But you got to. Only chance."

It was a tough decision. If she did stay there while the enemies closed down from above there would not be shelter for both; only space between the rocks, which slanted almost together, for a single person. Moreover, if medical help were not secured, Kermit would surely bleed to death. Evidently a lung had been punctured; for oozing blood was clotting on both front and back of the man's shirt.

"Go on, dear. And hurry!" he gasped. A gentle, moist muzzle rubbed the girl's cheek. The little red horse, in his own fashion, was trying to urge her, too.

Impulsively then she bent and kissed the man's damp forehead. "All right, partner; hold 'em. I can get Doc back here in a couple of hours." She swung astride Red. "Take care of yourself, dear."

LOW ON little Red's back, the girl hurtled down the wash. Impulse urged her to stay; logic told her to press on. Remaining, both would be killed; by getting back with a doctor and some of a posse perhaps, Kermit might be saved. Bullets whanged and whistled; but the range lengthened. Rain streamed down torrentially.

Down the wash, where water now sluiced, quickly running up to Red's hocks, horse and girl went galloping. An hour would take them to a cluster of 'dobe huts which was a Mexican village. There, too, a Mexican doctor, the nearest physician within fifty miles, would be found. An old man of pure Spanish strain; competent enough.

The wash ran down to Snake Cañon. In foaming waves behind them now the rushing water rose. A cloudburst in desert country—where often there may be no rain for two years—is a terrifying spectacle. Ruth hardly considered it at the moment as, helped by the water's rush, they sped on. Brush and the smaller piñons began to be swept from their tenuous root holds. Belly deep in this débris, the red pony was half running, half swimming now. Ruth's legs felt the water's rush as if it would wrench her feet from the stirrups.

Snake Cañon was dead ahead. A torrent of muddy water, like a veritable gorge of Niagara, rolled in front of them.

Little Red would try to swim anything. No doubt of that. But to head

him into that terrible flood would be certain death for both of them. She must find some other way across.

She swung the pony's head sideways. Up a nearly vertical bank the plucky little horse went scrambling. They were safely out of the maelstrom where the rushing water of the wash ran into the roaring river. Ruth urged her mount upstream.

Red, unlike cow ponies, could jump amazingly. With the girl's light weight on his back he could launch himself a mighty distance. Now, if they could find some narrow place in the gulch—

Below, the torrent roared, creamy with scum and streaked with brushwood. The pony kept warily away from the very edge of the bank where often whole tons of dirt and rock were sliced off and went thundering downward. Still there seemed no way across. Every moment was precious: back yonder Kermit Stone's life blood was slowly draining away.

It was then that little Red, of his own accord, halted in a heavy stand of timber. Gingerly the pony began to edge sidewise toward the treacherous bank of the stream. Ruth saw what had drawn her pet. Squarely across the chasm of the torrent a big cottonwood tree had fallen, its roots undermined by the flood's rush.

"I don't know, Red horse," she hesitated. But the red horse, picking up his small hoofs as delicately as if treading a splintery lava flow, pressed straight ahead.

It was a daunting endeavor. One of the pony's best tricks, to be sure, painstakingly taught and practiced, was to walk a two-by-six plank laid across two sawbucks. Kermit had showed him off to Ruth's delight. But there the possible fall had been only a couple of feet at the most. And the plank offered a flat, smooth surface. Here was the rounded bole of a tree and a drop to certain destruction. But Kermit would be dying! Ruth looped the reins loose.

As the pony deftly picked his way through the tangle of upflung, gnarled roots the girl did not dare look downward. Hands gripping the saddlehorn, she sat in dreadful tensity. This was a matter for little Red's cleverness and courage alone. They moved out over the chasm.

Ruth was well aware that the very worst thing she could do would be to try to correct any misstep of the pony. Left to itself, the little horse might be able to correct any error. Overbalanced by a slightest motion in the saddle— Inch by inch they moved forward.

The girl kept her eyes straight ahead, blinking furiously to keep out the dashing pelt of the rain. The wind tore at the saddle skirts. Beyond the pit of the abyss the land rose to a low mesa, not heavily wooded as on the northern side but spotted with no more than dwarfish cedar, scrub oak and the eternal greasewood. There—if they ever got there—they could travel fast. A couple of leagues only to the Mexicans' pueblo. And there Dr. Cortez would be, the good old man who alone, in all this stretch of desert, might save the wounded cowboy.

On, infinitely slowly, they progressed. Little Red, like a cat on a fence, moved his feet daintily along one straight line; his body swaying slightly, as a tight-rope walker sways to balance himself. Ruth, conquering tenseness, let her body go limp, matching the rhythm of Red's gait.

Only once her eyes dropped to the cloudburst's run. She shut her eyes at the sight. Wicked waves, churning high, seemed to reach up to clutch her.

Then the red horse gave one bound; a leaping, desperate lunge which all but unseated the rider. But she hung tight to the horn.

And, under her, Red was running; skipping the waving branches which spread greenly on the cañon's far side. They were over, safely over!

"Yi, Red! Oh, you good little horse!"

Red whinnied an answer.

DR. CORTEZ flung open the door of his neat, whitewashed 'dobe cabin. The elderly physician was sunburned to a saddle color on face and throat, but his forehead was as white as Ruth's. *"¿Que es?"* His eyes widened at sight of his strange visitors.

Gasping, Ruth started her story.

"Poco á poco—easy," the kindly old physician warned. *"Vino,"* he poured a small glass of honey-colored wine. "Tell it to me easy. *Bueno."*

Ruth spoke quickly but coherently now.

"Here?" the doctor questioned, pointing to his own chest. "Poor fellow, but there ees some chance. We go queeck." Already he was pulling on his boots and wrapping a poncho around his plump shoulders.

They were already outdoors at the shed, both saddling up the doctor's bald-faced roan. They went off through the rain at a high lope.

Easily the doctor comprehended the girl's description of the flooded cañon; and they swept on a long diagonal toward the west where more level land likely would make fording possible. Even if little Red would again essay his tight-rope performance the cottonwood "bridge" would be impossible for the bald-faced roan.

Sure enough, a couple of miles above where the cottonwood had fallen, they found what had been an open flat where the water spread out in a shallow pond. Through that they splashed, horses lunging.

The cloudburst had now spent its force and there was no more than a chilly drizzle as the rescuers worked their way around toward the point where Ruth had left her wounded companion. They came on the running wash quickly enough and proceeded to work cautiously upstream. Water ran comparatively sluggish in the wash now, though still knee deep for the horses.

Both riders were alert for the echo of a shot which would signify that Kermit was yet alive and able to hold off his attackers. Interpreting, it would seem, his mistress' feeling too, Red kept his own ears pricked forward. The soft slop-slop of the horses' feet in the muddy ground, and the swish and gurgle of the stream were the only sounds though.

"If he's still there," she spoke falteringly, "we ought to hear something."

"Maybe he scare 'em off, *si!"* the doctor soothed.

Cherishing that hope, they pushed on in silence. But when they reached the claim; spurred up to the sheltering boulders where the wounded man had holed in, there was no human being there. There was only the grim traces that a bleeding human being had been there. Not even the purging rain had been sufficient to clean away the rusty blood stains from one boulder's slope; the softened soil showed plain sign of the boot prints of several men; and, equally plain, a scuffed path which indicated where something had been dragged. Kermit, alive or dead, had been carried away.

"Oh, what'll we do, Doctor?" Ruth was weak, sickish, for a moment.

"Poco á poco—easy!" the kind old man soothed. "We find heem; the trace ees plain. The red one, he know already!"

Indeed little Red, impatient, was already attempting to move straight on uphill of his own accord, following the deeply marked prints of several other horses. Tense in their saddles, every nerve alert, the two riders followed the clearly trampled trail. The country was wild and rough, nothing but scrub piñon, flint slides and jagged boulders.

Ruth pointed suddenly. "See, Doctor, there on that bench above the wash. The door of a dugout!"

At the same instant the doctor's bald-faced roan nickered piercingly. Other horses, hidden, answered.

An abrupt rattle of shots came from across the wash's narrow span. Four figures had sprung up from the ground; and were commandingly abreast of, and above, them.

Ruth, even as she wrenched the gun from her waist-band, saw the doctor sway in his saddle. His roan, hit too, reared and whirled. Doctor Cortez was slung to the wet earth.

Almost at the same moment a hammer seemed to strike the girl's temple. She tried to resist the shock; but her muscles would not respond. There was no strength at all in either arms or legs. And, as a mist of darkness crushingly dimmed her eyes, she, too, felt herself falling.

EVENING of a day, which had ended at last with bright sunset, was slowly veiling the sky as a lonely rider along the county road came to an abrupt crevasse sliced across the highway.

The road authorities had made a commendable effort to install a rough tin culvert at this point where Snake Cañon, every so often, was accustomed to spew out a sudden, torrential stream. But you might as well have expected to pour a bucket of water through a pipestem as to have hoped that the culvert today would have been adequate to take the flood thrust at it. Culvert, highway and all had vanished; and a neat, sharply cut barranca now effectively slit the road.

Muttering sourly to himself, Hank Hewins, a rancher from up along Bullfrog way, cast right and left to find some place where a slide would afford his pony a slanting way down. And, sure enough, a hundred rods to eastward, some peculiar object was sticking up, an object not natural to the general lay of the landscape.

Heading his broomie thither, Hank was able to determine that this was the tin culvert, fouled at the bottom of the cut and slanting upward at an abrupt angle. He rightly surmised that the banks would be less steep there. Yes, here was a gravel slide. "Hi-yup!" he pushed his bronc down, anxious to reach the lights and recreation of Kime's Desert Tavern.

The pony, without warning, went straight up in the air, and came down to jar Hank's spine from the patch in his buckskin pants to the knot in his neck bandanna.

"Well, gad-dang your ornery guts; seems like somethin' spooked you, hammerhead!" He wrestled the broomie down into something like more proper behavior. Then, with natural curiosity, worked his way back to see what all the ruckus had been about.

For all that he was a buckaroo—a waddy foaled in a corral—old Hank could not persuade the broomie to go nearer than five rods to the upthrust culvert. Queer. He got off to see.

The dead man he found by the culvert explained the bronc's spookiness. The bullet hole through the corpse's head would take a lot more explaining.

This man, as Hank well knew, and as everyone in the desert knew too, was the beloved old Spanish doctor, Cortez. And the doctor had not been drowned to death.

Hank, thin-lipped, fierce-eyed, put out for the Mexican pueblo.

Things developed fast then, amid the wailing and lamentation of the doctor's brown-skinned people. It didn't take Hewins long to discover how and why it had been that the elderly doctor had ridden out even in the mist of the cloudburst. Curious always as squirrels, there had been a score of ears which had overheard Ruth's impassioned plea to the physician; and had more or less understood what had transpired.

The whereabouts and fate of the girl added now a new complication. No one seemed to know, indeed Ruth had not divulged, whither they were riding. Find out about the doctor's death first, get a clue that way, was Hewins' prompt decision. A dozen volunteer messengers on any animal that would

carry a man, broncs, mules, burros, went scampering off for the sheriff.

More leisurely, satisfied at last that he had found out as much as he might, Hank Hewins, with some of the older Mexicans, retraced his path to the county road. There, in sorrowful silence, they waited the posse's arrival.

Sheriff Sims did not lag. Here was no common range crime. Drygulch some fence-snipping sheepman; bushwhack a lone saddle-bum; and the interest of the law might be casual. But old Doctor Cortez, for all his alien blood, had been in the highest sense a white man. Riders through the night came thundering.

Men cursed no louder than a whisper as they bent over the corpse. Some, in whispers, were even praying.

Sheriff Sims summed up the matter well. "He come from up yonder, o' course," standing over the pitiful corpse, and pointing to the Paiutes. "The skunks that plugged him throwed him in the cañon, not figgerin' his body would end up all but on a public highway. That'd account fer him, and fer how he got here. Now, as to the reason? He was last seen with King's daughter, right?"

"*Si, señor. Señorita* Ruth."

"Wal, it's no secret any longer; but this gal and a fella called Stone struck a paystreak lately; as purty samples as anyone ever see. And friends," Sims' voice unconsciously sank, "wharever thar is gold thar is also likely to be murder."

Hank Hewins nodded. How well he knew the boot-hills of Bullfrog, Rhyolite and Bonnie Clare, the graveyards where men, dying suddenly with their boots on, were buried so shallow that their toes often stuck out.

"Well, after 'em! Come on!" barked some impatient rider. "What's all the buckin' and bawlin' about? Come on, let's take after 'em pronto!"

"Let's go, sheriff. Let's go!" from a dozen milling others.

"Whar?" said Sheriff Sims shortly.

"Wal, braid my whiskers, Sims; wharever at the gal's claim is. Even if them sneakin' coyotes have vamoosed we can track 'em easy from thar."

"Thet," said the sheriff sourly, "is the dirty deuce in the deck, my friends. You see, couple of nights ago, some snake busts into the court-house, and steals this location notice. We don't know just whar that claim is, 'ceptin' it's somewheres up yonder in a thousand square miles o' mountains."

RUTH KING came back to consciousness so gradually, and under such circumstances, that she could not seem to manage to figure out where she was or what had happened. She knew she was in complete darkness, in some utterly soundless place.

About her the smothering darkness, the sense of a certain stuffiness in the atmosphere, gave her a first dreadful impression that perhaps she had been buried alive. In her weakened condition, horrified by that ghastly idea, she was at first actually afraid to try to move any part of her body. She felt cold sweat on her forehead and instinctively bent an arm to brush it away.

Why, she had raised her arm; and it had encountered nothing. Abruptly, gasping relief, she attempted to sit up.

And, this time, it was just as if her head had actually hit some immovable object. The anguish that throbbed through her brain was like a blow from a flat board. Dizzy, and in too much pain to assemble her senses immediately, she let herself drop back prostrate. She *was* interred then? No; her groping hand contradicted that. Oh, yes, the bullet which had struck her. Again the exploring hand, a little steadier, discovered the scab of clotted blood on her temple at the edge of her hair. "Creased me!" her voice spoke aloud.

"Who—who is that?" came another voice from the dark.

Blurred and choking as that voice

was, Ruth knew it was Kermit Stone's.

"My dear! You're alive?" She crept toward the quarter whence the voice came.

"Say that again, honey." He had found her hand, was holding it hard.

"Oh, Kermit, Kermit, what happened? How are you? Where are we? Do you feel better? Where did they go?"

"Easy, easy, honey!" Like the poor doctor's *"poco á poco,"* Ruth thought dizzily.

"But you've come through all right?" Forgetting the pain in her head, she was stroking his face with her free hand.

"No," came the husky whisper. "I died and went plumb to heaven. But, durned if I don't bust my nigh wing and come loopin' back here, ker-plunk!"

"Idiot!" she laughed, half hysterically. In the dark their cheeks met.

Slowly, with painful difficulty, he got out his story: of how he had managed to hold off the claim-jumpers for a while; but how, as the loss of blood weakened him, he had found his aim wavering. How gradually he had lapsed from consciousness; and then wakened partially only able to sense that he was being locked into some dugout which had a solid wooden door.

"Oh, I saw that. We saw the place just before they got us." She told about the doctor. "Dead, I'm afraid."

"Well, you blessed kid, you're not." His weak hand gripped hers. "Now if we could figure to get out o' here—"

"I'll try." After experimental fumblings she presently located the door. But no light showed at any crack; night yet enveloped them. And the door was set in as solidly as the walls of the dugout itself. "We might tunnel out through the side, Kermit?"

"With what, honey? They turned me inside out. Didn't leave me as much as a match."

Her pockets, in shirt and levis, were literally turned inside out, too.

"If only little Red would come back! I think he got away when they creased me." She had heard tales of dogs, true yarns too, who had gone in search of aid for their masters and had succeeded in bringing back rescuing parties. She did not take into consideration the fact that this is often a dog's natural instinct. It is hardly the instinct of the equine.

Confined in their narrow dungeon, for there would not have been room for half a dozen men in this burrow in the cliff, the man and girl had no rational hope for quick release. Not until the doctor's prolonged absence was remarked would there be any hope of a rescue party. Ruth's grandfather, in the torpor of his old age, would not miss her immediately. And the doctor, on his far-flung missions of mercy, was often away for two or three nights at a time.

The prisoners would have felt even more despairing had they been able to know of the theft of the location papers filed on their claim. Hunting for one vague claim over the vast territory included by that gigantic moraine of mountains would be rather like trying to find one silk thread packed in a bale of cotton. Mercifully they were spared the knowledge that all record of their claim had vanished. The crafty thieves had planned well.

Unhesitatingly Ruth set down the whole affair as the rascally Sol Kime's work. It was pretty evident now that her grandfather's enemy had hired a band of rogues to run off the K Slash stock. Murder, to be sure, might not have been in Kime's original plan; but with the rich prize of the mine in sight any principles the fellow may have had were blinded. It seemed probable, as Ruth had to admit, that Kime would scoop the pot.

A long while waiting for light—if indeed they might be able to glimpse light through any cracks in the door—the imprisoned pair lay helpless. And what relief, after all, would the arrival of daylight bring? The thieves could leave them there to starve and rot, for all anyone might know.

It was the dismal realization of their sorry situation which evidently dulled Kermit's wandering mind to a new development of the weather. He had the fantastic idea that the thieves were blasting at the claim.

"No, dear, that's thunder," Ruth corrected him. "It often storms up in the mountains here; not like down in the desert."

The unspoken fear came to her that the thieves might seek this shelter from the storm. But they had apparently some better protection. For a while, as the thunder increased and lightning did make itself visible through the crack at the doorsill, there was no indication of a visitor's approach. Along the course of the wash would be plenty such places of shelter.

But something, something stealthy, was approaching the door! The girl, ear to the ground, could feel rather than hear something like a cautious footstep. There was a touch at the outside of the door; a gentle, brushing sound. Then, unmistakably, the puff of a horse's snuffle.

"Red! Little Red's come to get us!" Then she caught her breath in fear. If the pony whinnied their enemies might come. But he didn't, and the scraping continued.

A *clack* as something moved outside. "He's trying to lift the bar on the door. Kermit, Kermit, he's trying to lift it!"

The man gasped, "He can do it."

The scraping and shoving kept on. Here evidently was no loose-fitting slide-bar as on a corral gate. This locking device fitted snug. Yet it did not balk Red very long though. Released, the door swung open.

"Oh, Red!" Ruth was outside, her arms around the arched neck, now sodden in the thunderstorm. "No, don't speak, boy!" Cautious hands patted the warm steaming nostrils.

"Now, Kermit," the girl breathed, "I can boost you into Red's saddle and we can slip away. But we'll have to hurry, it's coming day."

The sombre black of the storm clouds was slit by thin streaks of orange. Quickly the storm would pass, and then the brilliant sun would blaze out revealingly. And up the wash, only a little more than a furlong above, was the dull cherry-glow of what would be the robbers' campfire. If they happened to be stirring yet, they could see every move at the dug-out's door.

It was a cruelly hard matter to lift the severely injured man as high up as the red pony's saddle. Young Stone could be of little service to himself; loss of blood had left him almost helpless. Just a limp bundle of rags he seemed as Ruth managed to get him balanced. His lung wound had sealed itself off momentarily; but the slightest jolting would certainly break it open. One hand holding him, Ruth walked beside the colt, whispering: "Easy, easy." Step by cautious step they started to move down the steep gully.

Gorgeously day broke, in blinding illumination. A complete quivering rainbow arched over the western sky. The gold and scarlet east was slashed by bands of emerald and opal. Thunder clouds edged with silver broke and scuttled away.

Behind the fleeing couple, and above, a man's shout echoed. With a startled backward glance the girl descried the shapes of four men by the fire.

And the men had spied them too. They were pointing directly down the wash. Ruth saw one man drop to his knee to level a rifle; the other three were jumping for their horses.

Impulsively the girl slapped the pony's neck sharply. Red leaped at the unaccustomed blow; then caught himself and stopped, as if actually comprehending. But too late. The plunge had unshipped the limp burden in the saddle. Kermit slid to the ground, his arms scarcely strong enough to shield his head.

Bending, Ruth tugged frantically to try to get him back into the saddle.

"No, no use, dear," Kermit managed to get out. But again the blood from

the reopened wound was oozing to his lips. "They can pick us off here in the open."

It would be no difficult shot, considerably less than a quarter mile's range. Any tenderfoot with a Winchester could hit upright figures that far. Crouched there above her partner's inert form, the girl waited the crack and flash of the rifles, the shock of a bullet's blow.

"Down, get down; stay low, dear." Kermit's weak hand tried to pull her.

"What use, dear? They can ride over to us in a minute." With her bare hand she was wiping the foam and blood from his mouth. In the scant clothes they wore, with not so much as a penknife for a weapon, they had no chance at all. "Yes, they're coming," she said softly. "Running, not riding." Sitting, she had taken his head into her arms and held it against her breast. "Too bad it—had to end this way," she choked.

Faint though his vitality was, Kermit summoned a grin. "I dunno," he said dreamily. "If it's got to end I don't know a better way."

Her lips were on his damp forehead. She did not waste even a glance at the attacking ruffians who were leaping down upon them.

She did not bother to wonder why they didn't shoot; or why they came running on foot instead of mounting their ready horses. She did not even speculate as to whether she'd be killed immediately. That didn't matter either. For the man she knew she loved would, without quick aid, die in a very short while anyhow. The slightest rough handling would induce the fatal hemorrhage.

But when, at length, the space of two or three minutes must have elapsed and still the gang hadn't arrived, Ruth did look up curiously.

Why? There they were, sure enough; Kime's hired rustlers and killers. Bearded, evil-looking, all four of them, were grouped not a hundred yards away. Two were holding rifles; two had long, naked sheath knives. But they were not advancing. One, apparently, the leader, was talking fast in a low voice, gesticulating; now and again pointing down the wash.

Another, with a knife, cursed outright; and, as if impatient of the delay, jumped to run forward. Hands grabbed out, and missed him.

It was then that the red pony did an amazing thing. Up an outstanding pinnacle of bare rock he plunged in a dozen leaps. There he stood clear against the bright sky, magnificently outlined. Shrill as a siren of alarm, he whinnied.

The man with the naked knife paused in his rush. His black-toothed mouth sagged open. Clear around the hills ran the nickering reply of a dozen answering horses. And, yet unseen, but resounding from below, came the clatter of hoofs over loose rock.

The red colt had pointed the way for the sheriff's rescue party.

The thug who had hoped to slit throats whirled back to his accomplices. Well enough they had known how near the posse was; from their height by the campfire they had been able to see the riders far down the draw; riders hidden from the man and girl. That had been the good reason for the outlaws' reluctance to fire; their prudence in leaving their horses tied lest the sound of the shod hoofs might drift down to the rescuers.

Neither man nor girl saw the quick and bloody revenge that was dealt out by men who were loath to waste rope on the murderers of an old and unarmed doctor.

Deputies had first thought the man and the girl dead too, so apparently motionless they were huddled there together. Till Sheriff Sims, sitting his tall horse, pushed closer for another look. "Guess oncet again," he said. "Dead gals don't kiss fellers; nor dead fellers grin and like it." He raised his voice and called, "We found that claim on one of these coyotes, or are you two too busy to care about a gold mine?"

Faithless Cowboy

By Clinton Dangerfield

This ranch girl felt that faith in a loved one should surmount damning circumstances—and she was right!

I'LL MAKE Tex Hardy speak to me," Flame Oakley murmured angrily to herself. "He shan't go on avoiding me without telling me why!" She struck across the dusty main street of the cattle town and reached the old, gnawed hitching rack.

Tall, bronzed Tex, busy digging a pebble from his horse's hoof, apparently didn't see her though she was close beside him. She demanded impatiently, "What's the matter with you, Tex?"

The pebble fell. Tex straightened up and turned to face her. He was grimly silent, his handsome face haggard, his eyes bitter.

Her sweet voice softened, "I know you've been miserable, Tex, over Len and Ed Morse getting killed by the sheriff for resisting arrest. You gave them shelter, you believed in them. But Tex, the sheriff fought fair. And surely their death is no reason why

you should avoid me. I'd think our engagement would help to comfort you."

Love and hate struggled in Tex Hardy's eyes. "From now on, keep away from me. If you were a man—" He bit off the sentence's end. Flame could scarcely credit her own ears.

"I'll keep away from you. No fear! But not till I know what's changed you so," she retorted fiercely.

With a quick, savage movement he drew a crumpled note from his pocket and thrust it at her. Swiftly she tore it from his fingers, and read it. Then, whitening, she turned on him with blazing eye. "You dare to believe I wrote this?"

"Your handwriting. Your signature. Even that funny colored ink you use," he countered bitterly.

"You actually think *I* wrote this horrible note to the sheriff, telling him where your pals were hid?" gasped Flame.

"It's your own writing, and you never liked them. But they believed in you—as I did when I let slip to you where they were. You resented my being friends with them." His voice was harsh with misery and reproach. "You got them killed. Oh, Flame, how could you bear to make me responsible for their deaths! I loved you so! If I'd never told you, they'd be alive now."

She forced herself to composure, tried to think. "Did the sheriff give you this?"

"No. The Law doesn't give squealers away. He sent for me. Said, Ed, dying game, gave him a knife and a watch—for me. Your note was crumpled in the sheriff's pocket; he pulled it out with the watch. It was dark and he didn't see the paper drift down. I picked it up, saw your handwriting, read it." He gathered up the trailing reins, sprang into his saddle, leaned down to say hoarsely, "Here's hoping we never meet again!"

His spurs stabbed his horse. It flashed away, vanishing in a whirl of dust down the long, straight street.

Half stunned, Flame stood still with the crumpled note in her hand, forcing herself to think. Then she read the note again and again. A wonderful piece of forgery it was. Flame's handwriting was peculiar, but the reproduction was perfect.

She went back to the new little hat shop kept by Sally Enders. Sally had landed in the cattle town of Border penniless and Flame had financed the experiment. Sally already was doing well. With supple, deft fingers she set a saucy hat on Flame's burnished copper hair and cooed:

"Suits you fine, darling! Look in the glass!"

Flame stared at the mirror. She scarcely saw her own lovely face; she was staring at the heavily rouged countenance, the sleepy lidded and slant eyes of Sally, at her too full, sensuous lips. Sally wanted Tex. Until now Flame, singularly free from jealousy, had merely been sorry for Sally. Flame had felt secure and radiantly happy in knowing Tex loved her, and she just didn't blame Sally for wanting a man as daring, as handsome and clean living as Tex Hardy.

But now a new feeling toward Sally stirred in Flame's heart. Not jealousy, but a vague disquietude. What did she know of Sally's past? Still staring into the mirror, Flame, who had forgotten the hat, said slowly, "Sally, you're so deft with your fingers."

"Thanks, darling! Will you buy the hat?"

"Yes. And if you'd like a little freedom, I'll mind store for you an hour." Was that a fleck of violet ink on Sally's cuff?

"How sweet of you! I nearly die shut up here. Make it an hour and a half?" Sally hurriedly rouged her lips a deeper scarlet.

Flame nodded. Five minutes later Sally was on the street heading for the fly-specked hotel. Ten minutes later, Flame, feeling guilty, was swiftly exploring the bedroom over the store.

Very carefully hidden beneath some clothing she found a little violet ink in a small bottle, and a new pen and penstock. She put them back in place and ran downstairs and waited for Sally to return.

The minute Sally returned, Flame paid for the hat, left it till the buckboard came in from her dad's ranch, hurried to the livery barn, got her gelding and headed fast for home. A new anxiety was in her mind— Sing Lee the ranch-house cook.

A vision of Sing Lee with scrub brush and pail of soapy water, doing some work she herself had asked him to do. If only he had forgotten! If only he had decided he wouldn't do it anyway!

Her galloping horse stretched out to higher speed. Over the plain she flashed, past cottonwoods and willows, then into more barren ground, more broken going, finally into the mouth of a canyon.

She had scarcely entered this when the down wind brought to her a threat of mingled sounds, a strange rush of differing noises which she interpreted only too well.

"A stampede!" she told her horse. "But I won't turn back, I won't! We'll ride the slant trail above them!"

It was crazy riding. Just foothold enough, just height enough to save horse and girl as the van of the stampede broke, bellowing, moaning, into view. They roared along below her, horns clicking, split hoofs making a strange fast shuffle, each steer mad with panic. One misstep on her gelding's part and she'd be down among them, falling between the frantic ranks . . . to be trod under, blotted out.

She pushed south at a fast walk while they streamed north. Soon a thousand head went by . . . and now the pursuing cowboys raced into view behind them, ready to turn them when they were out of the canyon.

They stopped in horror at sight of girl and horse, watched breathless as she found a wild descent toward the canyon floor, then cheered her as she touched safely. They raced on, their shouts of relief scarcely heard by her.

Sing Lee . . . scrub brush . . . pail! What if . . . . Over and over the words beat out to the renewed gallop of her horse as Flame spurred him on through the dusk.

Old Sing Lee kept a shining kitchen, but to scrub outside of his own domain was another matter. It damaged his dignity, he was temperamental about it at times. At other times he would be cheerfully obliging. Sing Lee, and at last, the home corrals!

Flame shot past them heedless of her dad's call from the bars, slid to a stop before the porch steps, flung herself from the leather, rushed into Sing Lee's kitchen, almost gasping, "Did you scrub that coat closet floor?"

The Oriental drew himself up, complaining in high sing-song, "Sclub! Sclub! All time missee make extla wolk fo' Sing Lee!"

She uttered a despairing cry. "Then you did!" Tears welled.

The words and the tears didn't make sense, but her grief was plain and he was shocked. "No cly! Sing Lee do it now!"

She dashed away her tears. "Then you haven't done it! Don't! Don't even go near that closet! Savvy?"

"Me savvy!" Then as she ran out of the kitchen, "And me savvy you gone clazy!" he added.

But Flame, candle in hand, was on her knees searching the closet floor.

FLAME, unseen, rode swiftly away from the home corrals before dawn the next day. It was broad day when she reached the willow-shrouded creek close to Border. She hid her horse and, without crossing the creek, crept along its cool line, leaf masked, intending to reach the sheriff's office unobserved. But she was scarcely half-way when

two men, on foot, came straight to the creek, halting near her but never guessing she was on the other side.

The nearest, heavy-jawed, red-faced, with weasel eyes, growled: "Brought you down here out of earshot, because even the walls in that damn town has ears."

He fronted his companion, Slough, a cattle buyer, reputed to own a ranch in Northern Mexico.

"I understand," cut in Elerson Slough impatiently. "Spill your news, Ligg. It better be important since you killed one of my best horses getting here!"

His tones now were very different from the oily smoothness he had used to Flame on several occasions when he had tried to gain favor with her, and had tried in vain. She detested him. She knew Ligg by sight, a wily ruffian in Slough's pay.

Ligg snarled, "To hell with your horse! The Lynxville bank failed yesterday. They say it won't pay a cent on the dollar. That cash you aimed to buy Tex Hardy's cattle with today is gone. You're stripped."

Slough swore horribly. "And you was in a helluva sweat to bring me bad news, damn you!"

"Listen, I got here fast and secret so you could get to Tex Hardy and buy his cattle with your check afore he or anybody knows you're broke. Once he takes your check and gives you a bill of sale, the deal's legal. Hustle his cattle over the Border to your Sonora ranch and he can yell all he likes. You never knew the bank was busted!"

Slough's wolf gray eyes gleamed. "Hell! You got brains, Ligg."

"Shore! And I hate that blasted Tex for sockin' me in the jaw jest because I was kickin a pup around. The loss of that cattle money will ruin him! S'all that stands between him and a foreclosure. I'd plumb love to see his face when the check comes back to him marked No Funds. You meetin' his herd on trail, ain't you?"

"Yeah. At Six Pines. I'll be on the dot, check and all! I'll— Hell, somebody's running down the creek."

"I caught a flash of her at the bend," snarled Ligg. "It's Flame Oakley. Catch her, Slough! She's in ridin' clothes. Her horse must be close! She'll warn Tex!"

Slough needed no urging. Snarling a raging oath, he dashed for the speeding girl and flung choppy sentences at Ligg running beside him. "There's a boat at the creek bend. When we grab her, get her into that. Make it to the river."

"Yeah! Tex's girl! 'Fore I'm through with her she'll be glad to hold her tongue if I hold mine!"

Flame, running like a doe with hounds after it, was hampered by high-heeled boots, but so were the men whose riding heels were sheer spikes. And she knew they dared not fire on her.

They were so close on her when she reached her gelding that she'd barely time to jerk loose the tied reins, spring into the saddle, spur the horse into a run. Slough's outstretched fingers nearly touched the gray flank.

She sped away, turning on the leather once to see if they were still pursuing her. But the two men had whirled round and dashed for the town's livery barn.

In record time Slough was mounted, but Ligg caught his rein. "If you ketch up with her—and the goin's rough—snag her horse's foot with your rope. A busted neck for both—but jest an accident. Horse stumbled. If you kain't ketch up . . ." His low, cruel voice poured on half a minute longer. Then he let go the rein and Slough, his face dark with fury, flashed away alone. He was in a mood to do anything. If only he could get those cattle over the Border and cash them in for a new start . . . . Thoughts dark as vultures winged through his brain.

Flame, off to so promising a start, fancied at first that both Slough and Ligg had sullenly given up the game. But as soon as she left the plain and

topped a rise she twisted in her saddle, looking back to make sure.

Then she saw that Slough, unmistakably it was Slough, on his big bay stallion was in hot pursuit. She had heard often of the big bay's speed and endurance. But she tossed her bronze curls in scornful defiance, confident in the start she had.

Rougher and rougher grew the country toward Six Pines, but as her widowed father's close companion Flame knew a wide stretch of country. She'd been twice through Six Pines, which was merely a cross trail spot with half a dozen very tall clustered pines marking it. She was taking the nearest way.

When the two men had chased her on foot, she'd been ignorant of the hideous danger threatening her from Ligg. The man was all the more dangerous because he lived usually in Sonora, but had he captured Flame he would soon have vanished into another country, safe from the law or private vengeance.

Flame never thought of Ligg now, and she gave scant attention to the pursuing Slough—surely her advantage was too great. She'd certainly beat him to Six Pines. Her mind now turned to Tex for whom she was riding. She set her white teeth hard as she whispered to her galloping horse:

"We'll save his cattle, you and me. But if he tries to thank us . . . . after what he's believed of me. . . . Oh, Monte horse, how I hate him!"

Her mount snorted, shied away from a rattler, then began a steep descent among twisted hills and peaks which wholly masked the pursuing Slough.

They reached a bench and rode along it. Monte grunted with relief. Flame drew a small gauntleted right hand across her eyes. A sob tore from her smooth young throat. "Yes, I do hate Tex, Monte. I'd let his old cattle get bought with a phony check, only—only—"

Again Monte snorted. He didn't shy. His ears flicked back. Startled, Flame drew rein and listened tensely. Along the bench behind her galloped a horse, now very close. She knew instantly that it could be none other than the big bay. The tales of his amazing speed hadn't been exaggerated.

Tears and sobs ceased. Her eyes narrowed. She took the descent ahead at a reckless rate, leaning back to help Monte keep his balance, horse and girl like one in their wild unity of motion.

The going grew momentarily more perilous. Even twisting to look back might upset Monte's balance. But Flame's urge was too much. She did look back—and felt her veins chill with horror. Slough was building a loop!

Now at last she understood the full desperation of this man. If he snagged a foot for Monte and the horse broke her neck and its own, that would be classed as one more accident on a trail where riders really had no business! Her life meant nothing to Slough. His "legal" steal of the cattle meant everything! She was close enough to see his face, and it was deadly.

But he wasn't close enough yet for a cast. Not yet!

To Monte's surprise he was suddenly urged forward, forced into plunging onward and downward at a rate that doubled the risk. But one danger canceled another. Slough didn't dare copy her mad chancing. She gained the bottom safely and heard the sharp beating of Monte's galloping hoofs as he gamely broke into fresh speed.

She shuddered as she thought that she'd been only about three casts ahead in that frantic descent. She wouldn't look back for a time, fearing to see that dread loop building again. The canyon angled; to the left lay a tangled mass of boulders. She shot around the bend to the right and spurred on, encouraging the gallant horse with eager praise.

Then, "Monte, I don't hear his horse. I don't hear it! And I don't see it! Oh, Monte, we're going to make it! He must have got a spill, a horrible spill, back there on the down trail

where he tried to murder us, Monte!"

Relief ran like wine through her veins. She checked Monte's speed a little; he must be very weary; but she wouldn't walk him, for, in spite of her feeling of safety, an urge to be at Six Pines drove her fiercely on.

Six Pines and Tex—who such a little while ago had loved her! Tex who was to have given her an engagement ring next week. But that ring would be for some other girl now. Tex . . . bronzed, tall and straight like the pines. . . . Tex who'd become the best part of life to her, could never be hers now. Even if the plan she had wrenched herself away from in town, to make this ride, succeeded, his lack of faith in her would always be a yawning chasm between them.

If her plan in town bore fruit, circumstances would compel his faith in her, just as circumstances had destroyed it. But love's belief in loyalty must be above circumstances, she thought bitterly, or it wasn't love at all.

This thought was with her when she turned the last angle and trotted out on a grassy plain. The six pines rose in stately pride before her. Beyond them, held in a depression by Tex's riders, cattle lowed and grumbled throatily.

Half masked by the pines, she saw Slough's riders waiting on the cattle sale so that they could take over the herd. In the foreground Tex sat his horse. On the wide top of his saddle horn he balanced a paper, evidently about to sign the bill of sale.

MONTE flashed forward in a final burst of speed. Tex, who had just written his name's first letter, stopped and stared as Flame swept up to him.

Mute with angry amazement she saw, just behind Tex, and among the Six Pines, Slough on his big bay! The bay's head drooped. He was lathered with foam. His wolf eyes gleamed with hate as they met Flame's gaze.

His presence there seemed a hellish miracle, but Flame's swift intelligence needed only a second flash of thought to tell her that the tumbled boulders at the first canyon angle must have masked a canyon split which she'd never known of, but which had served Slough well. He had counted on that, on the superior speed of his horse to reach Six Pines in time to close his phony transaction undisturbed. Afterward, if Flame showed up, he could say she was lying and could drive the cattle off, the bill of sale in his possession.

Flame's right hand darted out. She jerked the bill of sale from Tex's fingers and as Slough yelled out: "Stop her!" she tore it to bits, crying loudly, "Don't take his check, Tex! It's phony. His bank failed. He's stony broke."

Slough snarled, "The wench must be a marihuana smoker! She . . . ."

"File your damn tongue when you speak of Miss Oakley," Tex flung out fiercely. "And hold your jaw till I hear all she has to say!"

Flame told her story in brief sentences, her anxiety rising as she saw the ruthless fury in Slough's wolfish eyes.

As she paused, Slough cut in, "That fellow Ligg did bring me a rumor about the Lynxville bank, Hardy. But before I left town a second messenger brought word it was just a lie started by a rival bank. My bank is sound as a nut."

"Don't believe that!" Flame's voice was steady in spite of growing fear in her heart. "There couldn't have been a second messenger. Slough rode right after me."

Slough pushed his bay forward.

"Here's my check for your cattle, Hardy. Take it and write me another bill of sale."

Tex Hardy shook his head. "This deal is off, Slough."

Slough let the check flutter to earth at Tex's feet. "There's your pay in

full for the herd, Hardy. If you don't pick it up it's your own fault." Backing his horse away, he spoke in high, snarling tones. "My men and yours are witnesses I've paid you in full. If you won't write a bill of sale, I'll take the herd without it." He wheeled his horse and trotted him toward the depression, calling to his men, "Forward with the drive, boys!"

Tex spurred after him. Sick with terror for Tex, Flame waited. Better she'd never have come than to cost Tex's life. She knew Slough was a deadly shot and he had twice the number of men.

Slough meant to get those cattle! Too late Flame realized that Slough's kind will play hell's last card at any risk.

Tex's voice whip-lashed through the still air, "Those cattle are mine. I'm not selling them till I'm certain your check's good. If it is, you shouldn't object to my investigatin'."

Slough whirled the bay around. As he wheeled, Slough drew at lightning speed. Yellow flame, hot lead, a crash of sound burst from his forty-five. To Flame's ears, only one gun spoke. She froze with horror, staring at Tex, expecting to see him crumple, pitch from the saddle.

Then, as her heart seemed stopped with fear, a riderless horse shot by her —Slough's big bay.

She heard Tex's voice, dominant, warning, "You outnumber us, fellows. But your boss is dead, and you'll be fighting in a rotten cause, with no pay at the end. He drew first—you saw him. If I hadn't fired from the hip when he cleared leather, I'd be in his place."

Slough's men, temporary hirelings and gunmen chiefly, could hear reason where their own interests were concerned. They withdrew, packing off Slough's limp body across one of the horses.

Tex's foreman grinned, "What now, boss?"

Tex said soberly, "Drive 'em back on our spread, Gillis. I'll be with you later. I'm seeing Miss Oakley home."

Flame Oakley, thrown from one emotion to another, now felt a surge of sustaining and angry pride. She said coldly, though inwardly weak from reaction, "I'm seeing myself home, thanks. Ride along with your cattle."

She turned her weary and hock-scarred pony away, holding herself proudly erect. She took a longer but a smoother way toward town and, as she rode, bitterness against Tex and a great longing to feel his arms around her mingled in her distracted mind. She had ridden perhaps a quarter of a mile when he came up beside her, leading a fresh horse for her.

For Monte's sake, she let him make the change, Monte to take the led horse's place. Tex turned from saddling the second mount. Barring her way to it, he said quietly:

"I been doing some thinking since I saw you last, Flame. Before I thank you about saving me financially, I want to say that if a man can't trust a girl when circumstances look black against her, then he ain't worth marrying. I was jarred off my feet by that note, knowing you never liked Len nor Ed. You always claimed they was crooked as rams' horns. But when you said you didn't write that note, I should have believed you then. I do believe you now, though I reckon that won't do me much good with you. You'll probably never forgive me, darling."

She crushed down the rapturous cry that nearly left her red lips, and managed to say levelly:

"I don't want to talk now, Tex. There's something I've got to try out. I'm staying tonight with the preacher's wife in town. I want you to meet me at noon at the sheriff's office."

"The sheriff's! That hellion who killed . . . ."

"Two men who tried to kill him first. Will you do what I ask?" Her voice was steady, challenging.

He shrugged. "Though I don't understand—yes."

NOON, in coppery heat, blazed down on the sheriff's office. Flies buzzed sulkily on the window-pane. Heavy cigar smoke hung in the air. The sheriff tilted back his office chair as he watched Flame push a very puzzled Tex behind the screen which Flame had ordered arranged there. Tex halted to scowl at the sheriff, growling through the noise of an incoming train:

"I'd never have set foot in your office, Colter, if Flame hadn't insisted on this foolery, me not knowing—"

"That there screen is for you to git behind. Shut up, and stretch your ears," drawled the lazy-voiced sheriff.

Angry and perplexed, Tex flung himself into a chair behind the screen. Minutes dragged by. Flame sat behind him, silent.

High heels clicked across the floor. A woman's voice said smoothly, "You told me to come over at lunch time, Sheriff. I don't understand why."

"Wanted to tell you a little story, Sally. Once there was a trio of counterfeiters, two men and a gal—"

"Crime bores me, Sheriff."

"Don't think you'll be bored. The law was so hot after 'em that they refugeed out West. The gal stayed in town. The men denned up on a ranch, workin'. They stole two horses, fast ones, and hid 'em. If they had stole three horses things would've been different. Well, they told the ranch owner they was lyin' low because they had saved an old nester's life and had to down two mean killers doin' it. They 'just wanted honest work till the storm blowed over.' Slick-tongued, they got the rancher fooled in 'em. Meantime they was tired of the gal, and aimed to shake her. She overheard 'em say that if she followed, they'd blot her out. Shortly after this, to git out of workin', they claimed they'd been shot at. They hid.

"The gal, her name was Sally. . . . Now, now, Sally, quiet down. Plenty gals have that name," drawled Colter. "This Sally she visited a gal who had helped her, saw the gal comin' in with her rancher sweetheart. Sally hid in a clothes closet next the living-room. She heard the rancher talking with his gal. Heard him let slip the hideout of them two who aimed to shake Sally, who never thought the floor in the dark closet might be dusty and hold tracks of number three shoes. That's your size, isn't it, Sally? Pretty small, too. Smaller than Flame's even, who knew someone *must've* hidden there."

"My dinner will burn. I can't stay."

"You'll wait! 'Tain't polite leavin' in the middle of a story. The gal counterfeiter now had a weapon agin her confederate and agin Flame—whose man she wanted. Seems Flame had disliked them two hideouts the one time she'd seen 'em workin' on Tex's ranch—kinder instinct. So this Sally steals some of Flame's violet ink and paper, but later on that stolen ink was found."

The pitched tenor of the conductor cut the air. "All aboard!"

The noise of a chair overthrown, in the sheriff's path, the flying patter of high heels running out of the open door, the stumble and curse of the sheriff over the chair, the heavy thump of his boots after the high heels, the crashing smash of the screen Tex tossed aside, all seemed to come at once.

Both Tex and Flame dashed to the door, halted there. They saw the passenger train rapidly pulling out, saw Sally pulled up the steps by a horrified porter, saw the sheriff swing on and then the train swept them away.

Tex turned to the girl beside him, his eyes imploring, longing, "Flame, do you forgive me?"

He caught her in a swift hard embrace. She felt the warm fire of his body as she was crushed against him, thrilled to his broken, "God, if I had lost you!" She lifted her lips to his.

RANCH ROMANCES' amateur page

Editor's Note:—This page is made up from contributions of readers. On it we shall publish original pieces of prose or verse or cartoons. The only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs, and that the contributions be such as will appeal to people interested in the West and in Western stories. For each contribution published we will send the writer (or artist, if it is a cartoon) two dollars. Each person may submit more than one contribution.

Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. No submissions will be returned, nor can we enter into correspondence about your contributions. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.

A Cowboy's Snore

I've listened to Caruso, I've heard the Dutchmen dance,
In fact I've heard musicians in my time.
I've heard the noise of battle on the flaming front in France,
And heard the German guns along the Rhine.
I've heard a banshee wailing, I've heard a family row,
And listened to that old Niagara's roar,
But all of these together wouldn't make a summer breeze
Compared to this cow waddy's nightly snore.

It doesn't matter what you've heard in times of peace or battle,
You may have heard an avalanche or a herd of Texas cattle,
You may have heard the chopping guns, rattling fast and hard,
Or rivet hammers driving in Mare Island Navy Yard,
Or you may have heard a cowboy off on a nine-day spree
It doesn't matter what you've heard, just take a tip from me:
Although you think it awful to hear a lion roar,
Just stay one night in this line shack and hear this cowpoke snore!

Brent Doty, Electric City, Wash.

Two-Gun Thompson

Two-Gun and his wife woke late one night to hear sounds coming from the corral. Two-Gun, pulling on his pants, said, "I'll fix that danged rustler!" He crept cautiously outside, ignoring his wife's frantic pleas to be careful, and approached the corral. The noise of the intruder increased.

"Pluck the stars, ye ornery coyote," Two-Gun yelled. Then something brushed against him and Two-Gun dropped his sixguns and ran! "Run, Mary, run!" he shouted as he neared the house.

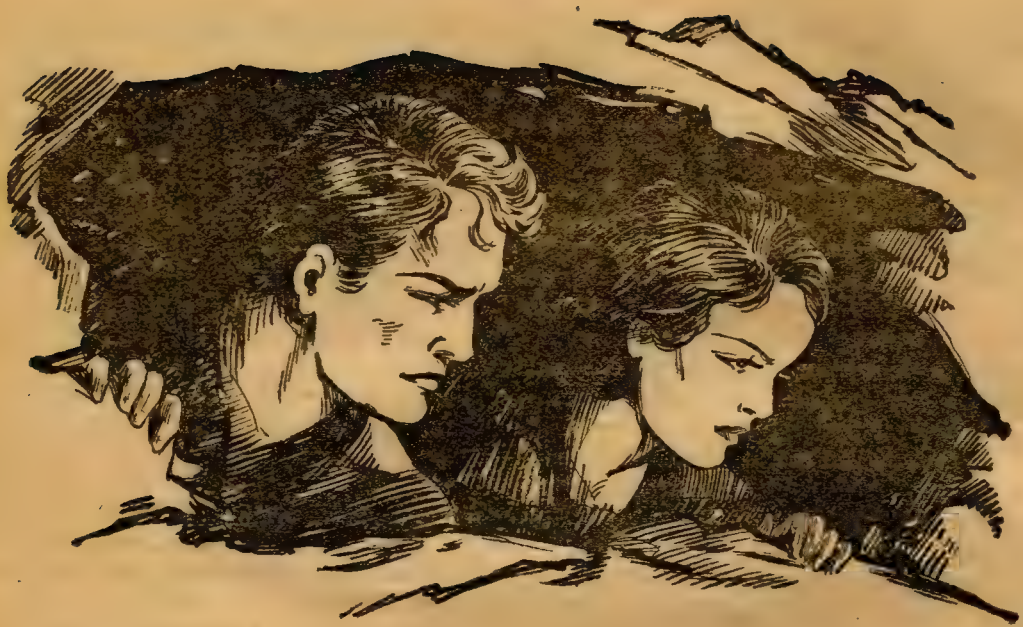
Mary gasped, "Two-Gun! Oh, my brave darling, what is it?" Then: "You git out of this house this second! The idee, a man of your age, Two-Gun Thompson, lettin' a skunk git the drop on ye!"

Mrs. Wallace Oliver, Sparks, Nev.

F. Hunt, Oxford, Ohio.

Honorable Mention

Lorene Grantham, Big Bow, Kans.
Anna Stauffer, Hubbard, Ore.
Martin Fornell, Reno, Nev.



Vengeance in Vigil

By William Freeman Hough

Part Two

SYNOPSIS

CHET CONROY, cowboy and ex-Ranger.
DORSEY (BINGO) BARTON, owner of the D Bar B.
AILSA (TWINK) BARTON, Dorsey's sister and owner with him of the D Bar B.
RON CLOVIS, manager of the Morning Glory mine, in which the Bartons have an interest.
BUFF JONES, small rancher who keeps a herd of buffalo. LILLIE, his daughter.
DOC HELFER, a power in the town of Vigil and an old enemy of Chet Conroy.
RINK EDSON, foreman of the D Bar B.
SHERIFF JOE BECK, local law officer; TICKER SAND, his deputy.

On learning that his best friend, Jim Goode, has been killed, Chet Conroy starts for the D Bar B where Jim had been foreman and on which Chet had been offered a job. His purpose is to track down Jim's killer.

In Vigil Chet is knocked down by a car driven by Ailsa Barton. Also, in town Chet discovers Doc Helfer, an ex-convict who once swore vengeance against Chet and Jim for helping send him up. Chet suspects Helfer of being Jim's killer and also of being at the bottom of whatever further deviltry may be afoot.

Riding out to the ranch, Chet finds Ailsa in her car, stuck. He pulls her out and she drives off. Farther on he comes on a bunch of poisoned and dying D Bar B cattle. Rink Edson and some boys ride up. They are hostile until Chet makes known his identity. Then they show him the spot where Jim Goode was killed and take him to the ranch.

The Bartons welcome Chet although Ailsa is embarrassed at having her auto victim turn out to be the awaited Conroy. That night a prowler takes a shot at Chet and leaves behind a glove belonging to Ron Clovis.

The next day Ailsa goes to the mine and reports the finding of the glove to Clovis, whom she trusts. Chet follows her, and in the mine office all three of them are held up by two men who make off with the week's workings from the mine.

Chet, who has seen Clovis wink at the men, at first thinks the hold-up a joke, but later suspects Clovis of being in collusion with Helfer. He takes the trail of the robbers, arriving at a bench on Buff Jones' land, where grow some poisonous wild turnips. He realizes some of these have been fed to the D Bar B cattle. While scouting, he interrupts a man digging the stuff, and is forced to kill him. Jones leads him to the camp of two men who claim to be prospectors and who previously told Jones they were digging turnips for food. The camp is empty, but Jones, returning home alone, is shot.

Lillie, Rink, Ailsa and Chet take Jones to

town to the doctor. While there Chet reports to the sheriff, and in his office discovers the stolen gold concentrate. He is shot at several times while in town. By arrangement, Rink stakes Chet's horse in a protected ravine, but Chet isn't there to get it.

CHAPTER VI

A Man Talks

ONLY a damned fool won't change his mind, and only an utter idiot will."

Chet muttered this as he crouched in the darkness behind the jail, listening to the subsiding clamor in the street. Much as he loathed to run, although on previous occasions he had found retreat advisable, he knew he should be well on his way to the gulch. That sudden dying away of excitement didn't fool him; he knew that Helfer was spreading a net at the moment. But he wanted that jug hidden under the blankets in the jail.

With gun out and ready, he slipped in the rear door and groped his way to the corner. Crouched over the blankets, he heard quick steps out in front. Tensely he waited, but the man went on down the walk. He fumbled with the blankets, pulled them aside and felt around on the floor. There was nothing there; the jug was gone!

"No magic to this," he said as he backed swiftly into the dark yard again. "I've just underrated Sheriff Beck, that's all."

The sudden drop-off of sound was ominous; he stood for a short time considering it; then, moving cautiously, he worked westward along the rim of the valley that lay below the town. Probing the street constantly, he saw a man half-hidden at the corner of a near building; the fellow was extremely nervous. There was another man at the rear of the livery barn. Chet knew this by the soft abrasive sound of a restless cuff against leather belt. He swung wide, edging through a clump of brush to come out at the street end. Here it was as black as the inside of a hat, and, drawing in a quick breath, he raced to the north side. He went up a steep slope with stones rattling under

his feet, the sound terrific in the stark silence. He veered quickly to the left, aiming for the gulch entrance.

For a quarter of an hour he waited there, studying the darkness ahead. Now and then a horse beyond moved restlessly, which was somewhat assuring. It must be his own mount, and standing alone, else there would not be those movements. But he must make sure. At last he was satisfied and wiggled down the incline. The horse snorted and then steadied as he spoke a low word of command. How good was the feel of that saddle under him! The net hadn't spread swiftly enough. They hadn't expected him to get clear this soon, which didn't reflect a great deal of credit upon Doc Helfer's planning. Perhaps that turn of luck in the upper hallway of the hotel had thrown them off balance.

He went up the gulch for half a mile and then turned directly up the west side of it; this in case a man should be waiting on the road to the ranch and possibly more farther up the gulch. The bay was a splendid mount and picked his way carefully down the far slope to splash across the West Fork of Vigil Creek. Then it was easy going. When he came to the ranch he did not barn the horse but stood him near an open window of the cottage. He sat down near this window to wait.

It was past midnight when riders entered the yard and went directly to the barn. He heard Rink Edson say, "Nope, his hoss ain't here. Must be on the wing somewheres."

"If we could only be sure he got clear," came Ailsa's voice.

"I think he did, Twink. I'm beginning to have a great faith in Conroy's ability. Besides, Sheriff Beck was watching out to see that no more shots were fired at him," Dorsey said.

"Oh, he made it clear all right," said Rink. "His hoss was gone from where I left it there by the gulch entrance."

They separated, brother and sister going to the house and the foreman to the cottage. Chet heard Rink sigh heavily as he stepped through the door. A match slithered along leather chaps, broke into flame and then died on the floor. "Judas! Just settin' here calm as you please. Danged if you ain't worse than a butterfly the way you flit around. Sure gave us the rumdums tonight, Chet."

"Never mind the light."

"Sure; I getcha. How long you been here?"

"Long enough. How's Buff Jones?"

"Comin' along fine since he learned that we don't accuse him of havin' a hand in the poisonin'. He saw me kiss Lillie good-by—and grinned. Man, did that lift a load from my chest!"

"Nice girl—Lillie."

"You're tellin' me! And you should of seen Ailsa after that battle in the hall. She was worried sick about you. Wanted me and Dorsey to go right out and do something to help. But we couldn't figure the lay, short of it bein' a job of that other cattle poisoner. We didn't know how many more was mixed up in it or who they was."

"So she was worried about me, eh?"

"Yeah. Been frettin' about you ever since. What do you make of the situation, Chet?"

"Too many angles to say right off. I only know that my number is up in some quarters."

"Well, Ron Clovis is in a jam, too. Stealin' that concentrate has sure cramped his style. He come up to Jones' room later on and talked about it. He's got to pay wages to his men come Saturday and he's short of cash."

"He still in town?"

"Oh, he's got a room at the hotel; that's where he sleeps."

"Humph!" grunted Chet. "Well, since Ailsa is worried about me, I'd better let her know I'm all right. Be back presently, Rink."

There was no light as yet in the big house, but as Chet stepped up to the veranda he heard voices in the living-

room. Dorsey and Ailsa were seated before the fireplace, discussing recent events. Chet's step was light but they heard it.

"Who's there?" called the rancher.

"Me," replied Chet simply.

"Good heavens! The patriot." But there was a distinct tone of relief in Ailsa's voice.

"Just wanted to let you know I was still alive and kicking," said Chet. "If you're interested."

"Interested! Of course, Chet. Come on in and tell us what happened."

For very good reasons of his own Chet touched but a few high spots of the occasion, agreeing with them when they suggested that his attempted killer must have been linked in the plot to poison their stock. He said nothing about the jug of concentrate or Doc Helfer. There were too many loose ends in that regard, ends that must be tied in before he could speak of them.

"I'm going to brew us all a nice pot of coffee," said Ailsa presently. "We need it." She touched Chet lightly on the shoulder as she passed on her way to the kitchen.

"Conroy," said Dorsey Barton after she was gone, "I can't tell you how much we appreciate the solving of this mystery. I'm terribly sorry that it has put you in a position of danger. Therefore, I'm not going to ask you to try and run down the mine robbers, as I had previously considered doing."

"But that's the next job, Dorsey."

"You mean you'll take that up before going on in the hunt for Jim Goode's killer?"

"I have a pretty good idea who killed Jim."

"You have? Name the party!"

Chet shook his head. "Not just yet. I'm pretty sure that the man who killed Jim and arranged for my own untimely death is mixed up in the mine robbery."

Dorsey Barton rubbed the palms of his hands together. "Things have come to a pretty pass in this country."

Ailsa came back with the coffee, saying that she had found a pot of it on the stove, left by the cook. As she handed him a cup she said, "Chet, there has been two attempts to kill you, and if you stay here there may be more."

"Is that a suggestion I had better drag my rope, Ailsa?"

She was a long time in answering. "I don't want you to go, yet I hate to think—"

"Don't worry," he said. "I've been shot at more times than you are years old, and I've got a hunch there's no lead marked for me up here. So long as all the hostile movements are made against me, I don't mind. In return, all I ask is that you be careful from now on; don't ride alone or far from the ranch."

Her independence flared. "I'll ride where I please. I won't be scared by any hoodlums who poison cattle or shoot our men."

"Now, please, Twink," begged her brother. "Don't you realize that there's something back of this? Whoever shot Jim Goode and poisoned our stock has some reason for doing so. In which case they may turn on us personally."

It had the beginnings of another argument between brother and sister, and Chet didn't care to listen. He finished his coffee and moved toward the door. Ailsa followed. "I suppose you think I'm a chesty little brat," she said.

"Sometimes I think a good spanking would do you a heap of good," he returned.

"Don't you ever try it," she barked. Then, more gently as he went down the steps, "Good night, you patriot."

Rink Edson had a piece to speak, too, and when Chet came back into the cottage the foreman said, "Chet, there's more to all this than meets the naked eye. You know things you ain't talkin' about. So I hereby declare myself in on what happens from now on. I'm done with this business of arrivin' at the spot marked X after the damage is done."

ND THUS it happened that the next morning the foreman rode off with Chet when he headed back for the north side of the D Bar B range. They came to the bench where the wild parsnips grew, passed the shallow mound which covered the man Chet had shot, and went up into the lining thickets. Edson asked no questions until they dismounted in the shelter. "Well, what's the plan?" he wanted to know.

"I want to get my hands on the second man," replied Chet.

"But hell, he won't come back here now, not after what's happened."

"Well, of course I've made mistakes before, Rink, but just place yourself in his position. It's been his job to dig wild parsnips and spread them about the range. This was done to accomplish a certain purpose and, so far as I can see, that isn't finished. The fact that his pard has been killed won't stop him, especially since his boss ain't satisfied."

"How do you know that?" quickly.

"I don't; I'm guessing. They put the heat on me in Vigil last night, which they figure will keep me quiet for a time. Today will be a swell chance to carry on the poisoning job."

The morning was not half gone when Rink exclaimed, "Chet, you're the world's prize guesser. Look there!"

A lone rider had appeared along the bank of the creek below the spring. While he made no attempt to conceal himself when opportunity afforded, he did keep looking this way and that. He came to the spring below the rocks, watered his horse and then rode around to the trail leading to the bench. When he reached the shallow mound where the slain man was buried, he halted and looked down.

"Jumpin' hoptoads!" hissed Edson. "That's Ticker Sand, the deputy sheriff. See his badge?"

"Yes. But hold tight, Rink. Let's see what he does."

The man Sheriff Beck had said was such a good trailer moved on to where the wild parsnips grew, dismounted and kicked one of the tubers with the toe of his boot. While he stood there he hitched at his gunbelt with his left hand. Chet stiffened.

"Shucks, he's just lookin' over the ground," muttered Edson.

"Wait!" Chet took the slack out of his own belt and then stepped into the narrow trail. The man below heard the sound and quickly looked up, hand dropping to his gun. He held that pose as Chet appeared. Rink edged into the trail, following Chet.

"You're Conroy," declared Ticker Sand. He was a thin, wiry man of uncertain age, very wrinkled of face and with lips a trifle loose.

"Right," said Chet instantly. "What about it?"

"We guessed you'd be comin' back up here today, and I've been sent to arrest you. I got the warrant here. Charge of murder."

"Which case?"

Sand pointed to the shallow grave to his left. "That one."

"Oh, yes. Seems as though I recall that Beck wanted to arrest me for that yesterday. I put him off and the same goes for you."

"Nope; I'm takin' you in."

"Nice of you." Chet shrugged, the movement seeming to lift his gun from its holster. Sand's eyes narrowed when he found himself covered. "Rink," said Chet as the foreman came forward hastily, "don't Buff Jones have a cabin hereabouts?"

"Back over the next rise."

"Good. Lift Mister Sand's gun and then lead the way to it."

"Look here," began the deputy.

"Shut up. You can talk presently, and plenty. Get going."

Rink Edson shook his head as he followed along. He supposed Chet knew what he was doing, but he certainly was being high handed with the law. The narrow trail crossed a pine needle flat and then dipped downward to a

short valley at the near end of which stood a log cabin. Rink had been told to lead the way, but Chet hadn't waited for him. Even now the slim ex-Ranger increased his pace, pushing the deputy along at the point of his gun. The latch was lifted and they marched in. Chet waved to a chair and Sand sat down.

"You, havin' been an officer, ought to know what this means," warned the deputy.

"Sure. Start talking."

"I've spoken my piece, which same put you under arrest."

"Then I'll talk a little. You was one of the men who held up the Morning Glory mine the other day and took that concentrate."

"What?"

"Don't bother to deny it. I was there and used my eyes. You hitched at your belt with the left hand that day, several times, just like you did down on the bench a while ago."

"You're crazy. I'm an officer, and—"

"So is Sheriff Joe Beck, but I found that jug of concentrate in his jail yesterday. I reckon he was the second man in that hold-up. Who was behind it?"

Sand gazed at Edson and shook his head. "This Conroy," he said, "is plumb insane." Edson had grave doubts himself.

Chet stepped forward, seized the deputy by the shoulder and yanked him to his feet. "You're about to get the worst third degree ever given a man, Sand. I mean it. Talk or get the works."

"Go to hell!"

Chet fought to control his temper. He closed his eyes, and under the tight lids swam a picture of Jim Goode stretched out on the ground with a bullet through his heart. His right hand came around and smacked Sand across the face. "Talk," he said hoarsely.

Ticker Sand picked himself up from the rough floor and rubbed a shaking hand across his bruised mouth. "All right," he whimpered. "Beck and me done it."

"Who for?"

"Ourselves."

"You lie! Doc Helfer was behind that robbery."

"I don't know nothin' about that."

"But you do know who killed Jim Goode! Speak up."

"For Gawd's sake, Conroy, have a heart. They'll kill me if I say anythin' more."

"You fellas didn't have a heart when it came to my pard, Jim Goode. Tell me who drygulched Goode."

"It—it was Helfer," in a whisper. "Now, can I go?"

"How did Helfer know that Jim Goode was riding to Vigil that day to mail a letter to me?"

"Before Gawd, I don't know that. Helfer claimed he had an old grudge against Goode, and that was why he gulched him."

"All right so far. Now, who took a pot shot at me the first night I was in this country?"

"Never knowed that happened. The only shot at you I know about was last night in the hotel."

"That was one of Helfer's men?"

"Yeah."

"All right, you can sit down for a minute."

"Holy cats!" murmured Rink Edson. "Did we find out some things!"

"Nothing but what I've suspected all along, Rink. There's some real reason behind cattle poisoning and mine robbing. Helfer knows the answer. I'm wondering who it is on the D Bar B that's playing in with him."

"One of our men? No, sir," said Rink staunchly.

"But somebody got word to Helfer that Jim was mailing the letter to me. Helfer didn't want me in this country."

"Listen, Chet, I was with Jim the time he wrote that letter to you. I was the only hired hand on the place what knew about it. We'd all talked it over after Jim had confessed the poisoning

was beyond him, and we decided to send for you."

"Who do you mean by we? Who all was there?"

"Ailsa, Dorsey, Ron Clovis and me. Ron had been over visitin', and since he was hitched up in a business way with Dorsey, the boss asked him what he thought."

Hard suspicion built up inside Chet. He veiled his eyes in order not to disclose it. For a time he stood very still, his mind far from the little cabin in the valley. Rink Edson waited impatiently, dividing his glance between Chet and Sand. Sand's loose lips were quivering, for he had sealed his own doom. If Conroy would turn him loose, he'd clear out of the country; but he read no such intention in the slim man's face.

"Well," said Rink at last, "what next?"

"We stay here for the present. Later on today I'm making a visit to Vigil."

"Goin' to take a chance on gettin' Doc Helfer?"

"Possibly."

"You sure are a glutton for punishment, Chet. Reckon I'll go along with you. But what about Sand?"

"He stays here. We'll tie him up and leave him to cogitate on his sins."

CHAPTER VII

A Game Well Played

THAT same day, about noon, Ron Clovis appeared at the ranch, his handsome face wearing a worried expression. Dismounting, he joined Ailsa on the veranda, plopped into a chair beside her and dabbed beads of perspiration from his chin. "Where's Dorsey?" he asked, foregoing his usual gallant greeting.

"In the house, Ron. What's the matter? You look as if the mine had caved in."

"Not actually that, although bad enough. The men have learned that I'm short of cash since the robbery, and they've quit on me."

"Quit working? But surely they know they'll get their money."

"These men are funny that way. Remember, I had to pick them up out of the riffraff in Vigil."

"But if they quit there'll be no production and therefore nothing with which to pay them."

"Exactly; but I can't make them see that. I came over to see if Dorsey wouldn't go back with me and talk to them. If they know that the mine is backed by this ranch, it will have a good effect."

The genial Dorsey Barton quite willingly agreed to go back with Clovis, though of course the mine wasn't actually backed by the D Bar B.

"But you've got fifteen thousand tied up in it," Clovis pointed out. "You should protect that investment."

Ailsa went with them, glad of an opportunity to be doing something. Chet had disappeared before breakfast and, though she wouldn't have confessed it was her purpose, those hours on the veranda had been spent searching the heat-ridden range with expectant eyes.

The Bartons and Clovis came down the long slope into the gulch to find the mine workers grouped about the mill. The stamps were silent and no smoke rolled from the high stack. Exuding a confidence meant to impress the men, Ron Clovis halted before them, made a little speech in which he stated that he had brought Mr. Barton over to show them that everything would be all right.

"Will he have our pay money come Saturday night?" called one. "That's what counts with us."

"Of course we'll have it," Clovis assured him.

"That's what you say. Let him make the promise."

"Well, really, men, you should trust Mr. Clovis," said Dorsey.

Clovis said in an aside to Ailsa, "The stubborn fools! Just as though one

stroke of bad luck would ruin us." Then to Dorsey, "Come down to the office and we'll talk it over." They stood about a table covered with blueprints of the mine workings. "Dorsey, we've got to get hold of some money right away. Can you produce ten thousand dollars?"

"Not immediately, Ron. I don't have that much cash on hand either in Vigil or Sioux Center."

Clovis stared out of a window, scowling. "I wish I had your credit," he murmured. "I thought of going to Helfer, but he's sort of down on me since I kicked so hard about the men gambling away their wages in his place." He turned abruptly. "You could borrow from him, Dorsey. It would only be a matter of ten days or two weeks before the money was returned."

"I don't like to borrow," said Barton.

"Yes, I know, and I'd hate to see you lose the money you've got invested here."

"If it's only for a short time," put in Ailsa, "I don't see the harm, Dorsey. Quite likely Mr. Helfer has that much cash on hand."

"Of course; I know he has," said Clovis quickly. "Shall we—or rather you—try him?"

They remounted and rode down the gulch toward Vigil.

The Bartons found Doc Helfer in his small office at the rear of his establishment. As they entered he stood up, inquired the nature of the unusual visit and offered them chairs. Clovis, as a matter of policy, had remained outside. Dorsey stated in simple language that he wanted to borrow a sum of money for a short time and Helfer very frankly expressed his surprise. However, he'd listen.

"I'll sign a note for you," said Dorsey.

"Yeah. Well, I'm not in the money-lendin' business, Barton, but since it's you askin' it I reckon I can step over the traces this once. A note will be all right if you'll back it with security."

"Well, I have eight thousand head of cattle on my range."

Helfer shook his head. "Sorry, Barton, but the cattle won't do. I've heard about the poison that's gettin' 'em. Dead beef don't make good security. How about the ranch itself?"

"Mortgage a ranch that size for ten thousand dollars? Oh, no, I couldn't do that. It's unreasonable."

"Well, it's you askin' for the money. You can see how I stand in the matter."

Ailsa was tempted to urge the mortgage since it would be but a short-term note, but Dorsey had stood up and was thanking Helfer politely for his consideration. He took her arm and they passed out to the street where Ron Clovis waited, and a few words explained the failure.

"But, great heavens, man, we've got to have that money!" Clovis gazed at them beseechingly. "The workers are on the prod, I can tell that from their actions. Let's go on to the hotel and talk it over."

They had scarcely reached the hotel when a grim parade entered the west end of the street. It was men from the mine, some riding, some walking. There was no question as to their destination and purpose. Clovis pushed his friends inside and faced them, his eyes wide with anxiety. "Well," he said, "you can see for yourself."

Sheriff Beck hastened across the street and joined them. "What's the trouble, Mr. Clovis? Ain't that gang been workin' for you?"

"Yes. They want their pay. I've been caught short since the mine holdup."

"Well, you'll have to calm 'em down some way; I won't have this town torn off its hinges by that bunch of hoodlums."

Clovis spread his hands helplessly. "Barton could help me if he would." The mine men halted before the hotel and began calling his name. "What can I tell them? Dorsey, for heaven's sake find Helfer and sign that note."

Dorsey gazed at Ailsa and caught a

slight nod of her head. He mopped the perspiration from his gleaming bald head and wet his lips. "Hold them off for a few minutes," he said and passed out the front door. Back in Helfer's office, he signed a ten-day note and a hastily drawn up mortgage; then, with ten thousand dollars in currency in his hand, he hastened back to the hotel. Clovis seized the money and stepped to the walk.

"See this?" he cried to the muttering crowd. "Your money, your wages. Go back to the mine and I'll have it there for you by dark."

The sight of that currency worked a charm; the general tone of the workers lightened and they turned back down the street.

"Whew! That was close!" Ron Clovis tucked the money in an inside pocket.

"Why didn't you pay them here?" asked Ailsa.

"The time rolls are at the mine office and without them I don't know how much each man has coming. Besides, my dear, if I paid them here they wouldn't go back to work until it was spent. I don't want Mr. Helfer to lay his hands on this money so soon."

Just before dusk the three of them started back for the mine, Clovis asking the Bartons to accompany him as he intended to write them out a new stock certificate to cover the amount of the loan. But as they passed Ailsa's wrecked car, two masked men stepped from behind it. Ailsa's heart went cold as she peered at the yawning muzzles of two guns.

"Hand it over, Clovis!" came a gruff command. "We know you got it with you."

"What are you talking about? Get out of our way!"

"Hop down, you, and no monkey business."

Ron Clovis, prodded with a gun, dismounted. The man reached for the inside pocket where he was carrying the money. "No!" Clovis screamed. "You can't have it!" and struck at the reaching hand. Like a flash the man reversed his gun and struck him over the head with it. Clovis crumpled in the dust of the road.

"Steady, you other two!" barked the second man.

The robber who had struck Clovis knelt down, ran his hand into the pocket and jerked out the bundle of currency. A white envelope came with it to flutter off to one side. Then they backed off, edged up the west side of the gulch and vanished in the shadows of the slope. Clovis squirmed in the dust and groaned.

Ailsa dismounted and knelt beside him, her fingers touching the rapidly swelling bruise on his forehead. "We should get him back to Vigil," she said to Dorsey.

"I suppose so," he answered dully. "That's what happens when a man waves money around before a crowd; too many eyes to see. And I don't suppose that Sheriff Beck will be able to find a trace of those fellows. He couldn't do anything about Jim Goode or the cattle poisoning. Ailsa, I don't like the look of this."

Between them they managed to get Clovis back on his horse and headed for Vigil.

IT WAS an hour later that Chet and Rink Edson came down the gulch and, passing the spot of the recent holdup, Chet's big bay shied at something white lying beside the road. He spoke sternly to the horse and would have passed on had he not remembered the handkerchief he had picked up in almost the same place. Turning back, he picked up the piece of paper, struck a match and looked at it. It was a letter addressed to Ron Clovis in a feminine hand. He placed it in his pocket. At the proper time he would return it to Ailsa, that and the handkerchief with Clovis' blood on it. His lips twisted wryly in the darkness.

"I still think you're crazy to make

this ride into Vigil," said Rink as they rode on. "Why don't you wait till you can ketch Helfer alone?"

"Now that I know for sure that Doc killed Jim Goode, that matter can wait. There's a little matter I want to take up with Ron Clovis. That's the gent I'm seeing tonight."

"I don't see where he fits into any of this."

"I'm not so sure myself, Rink, but I'm doing a heap of thinking."

Just before the gulch widened to the west end of the street they parted, Rink to ride on to the hotel, Chet to cut up over the hill to come in from the rear. He didn't flatter himself that Helfer would have a guard stationed above the town, but that didn't subdue a native caution. So he took it easy, keeping well up on the hill. Below, the reflected lights fell in yellow streamers across the street. He saw a rider cut through them, moving toward the hotel. That would be Rink. At length Chet turned down, the bay walking stiff-legged down the hill.

Rink recognized the three horses standing before the hotel and wondered what Dorsey and Ailsa were doing in town. Possibly a friendly visit to Buff Jones. He hoped so, for he was forming certain plans whereby Lillie would share the foreman's cottage with him. He passed up the stairs and rapped lightly on a door. Lillie opened it, her face framed in a square of light. Looking past her, he could not see the Bartons.

"How's things, honey?"

"Dad is better, but something else has happened." She drew him in and closed the door. "Mr. Clovis, the mine man, was held up tonight."

"What! Again?"

"Miss Ailsa and her brother were with him. One of the robbers struck him on the head with a gun. They've taken him to his room and the doctor is there."

"Sufferin' snakes, this thing is gettin' thicker all the time!"

The door behind them opened silently and the Bartons came in. Ailsa asked hastily, "Where is Chet?"

"Back up on the hill. He'll be here presently."

"But he shouldn't come to town, Rink. They haven't caught that other man yet and—"

Rink lifted a hand in a halting gesture. "Things have happened," he said. "Chet and me found out some things. But he made the play and I'll let him tell it. One thing sure, though, Ticker Sand didn't have a hand in the hold-up of Clovis tonight."

"Ticker Sand? Why should he when he's an officer?"

"Well, it was him and the sheriff that took the concentrate."

"Rink," said Dorsey Barton uneasily, "you've been drinking."

"Yeah? Well, we got Sand tied up in the Jones cabin, and he confessed it was them two what did it. Furthermore—"

"Wait!" cautioned Ailsa. "I hear someone in the hall."

But the hallway was empty. Still sure that she had heard steps, she crossed over and gently opened the door of Clovis' room. She uttered a slight gasp when she saw Chet Conroy standing over Ron's bed. He whirled at the sound, hand on gun butt.

"Chet, you should not have come!" she exclaimed.

"No?" He pointed to the man on the bed. "What's the matter with him?"

Briefly she outlined the day's events, ending with the robbery, and watched the grim lines form in his face. He looked again at Clovis and then pushed her into the hall.

"You mean to say that Dorsey mortgaged the ranch to get Clovis ten thousand dollars? And two men took it from him in the gulch?"

"Ron had to have the money to pay the men, Chet. They came to town prepared for trouble. Now the money is gone, I don't know what will happen."

"Humph! I've got a good idea. If this isn't the coldest steal I ever come

across." He seized her arm. "Don't you see it all now?"

She hesitated. "I only know that Rink just said that you'd tied Sand in the Jones cabin and—"

"Just the start," he interrupted. "Twink, you get Dorsey and Rink and get out of town. Go home right now."

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going after Doc Helfer, the man who killed Jim Goode, the man who holds the mortgage to your ranch."

"No, please! Chet, they'll kill you. Go back the way you came. I'm asking it of you."

His face softened slightly; then suddenly he swept her into his arms and kissed her. She struggled against him for a moment and then relaxed. "You will go?" she murmured.

"Sure, right down those front stairs. See you later—I hope."

She called his name as he turned swiftly and went down the stairs. When he did not pause she rushed back to Buff Jones' room. She faced those inside and they read the terror in her eyes. "Stop him!" she whispered. "He's gone to Helfer."

Ailsa, Dorsey and Rink reached the street together, but Chet was not in sight. Dorsey made Ailsa mount her horse, forced her to keep pace with him down the street. After all, Chet had come to get Jim Goode's killer, so give him the chance. When they passed the Alhambra the place was strangely quiet.

CHET'S sudden appearance in Helfer's place of business was a distinct shock to the patrons. None needed a second glance to be convinced that Conroy was strictly on the warpath. Those at the bar stood quite still as he swept past them; others held their places at the tables. Nor did they make any move when he vanished into that door leading into Helfer's private sanctum. They just waited tensely.

Chet found the small office empty, and savage disappointment lashed him. He stirred the scattered papers on the flat desk, rummaged through every drawer. It was not to be supposed that Helfer would leave such a valuable paper as a mortgage on the D Bar B lying around, but not to look would be careless. At length he turned back and passed through the saloon again, wordless. And for the next half-hour he cruised the whole town, magnificently heedless of the danger he ran. He even searched the jail thoroughly without finding the jug. As he left the place he bumped into Rink Edson.

"You several kinds of a damned fool!" snorted the foreman. "Don't you know you're liable to stop lead any minute?"

Chet's grin was satanic. "What they waiting for?" he returned. "I'm ready for the show." His lungs filled with air. "The hell of it is, Rink, that nobody's left in town but yellow skunks. Helfer, Beck—all the main cogs are out. Clovis I can get any time; he'll come bellyachin' around as soon as he can ride."

"Then for Gawd's sake give it up tonight and come along with me. Dorsey and Ailsa have ridden on ahead, and she's all shot to pieces over this wild prowl of yours."

But there was absolutely no measure for Chet's disappointment. Still hopeful, he crossed the street slowly, got his horse and mounted. True, it was a type of insanity; he was, for the time being, wholly devoid of caution. The grossness of the elaborate plot and his hate of Doc Helfer had done this.

Rink rode with him to the street end, saying nothing in those moments so full of possibilities; then, in the darkness, they sank spurs in their horses and rode westward past the gulch entrance.

CHAPTER VIII

Ailsa Rides Again

CHET STOOD before them there in the big living-room, his face serious, intent, and told them. The cattle poisoning was just the foundation, intended to give Helfer the chance to refuse the cattle as security. Beck and Sand had taken the concentrate to put Clovis in a position where he could ask help of the Bartons. The money secured from the mortgage had been lifted so that the men could not be paid, which would stop further work. With no production, there would be no way of paying back the loan, and Helfer would foreclose. All a gigantic scheme to get the D Bar B, the most valuable ranch in the State. Jim Goode could not have suspected all this, but he had known something was up. So he had been killed while sending for help.

"Who knew he was sending that letter?" asked Dorsey uneasily.

"Four of you people, of which only one would and could tell Helfer about it. Ron Clovis."

"But he wouldn't do such a thing," Ailsa exclaimed.

Chet's smile was thin as he looked at her. "No? Well, your friend Clovis is at the bottom of all this."

"No, no, Chet; you can't say that."

He shrugged. "I expected you to defend him, Ailsa, and I'm not blaming you. He took a rap on the head tonight during the hold-up; but who wouldn't for such large stakes?"

Dorsey Barton ran trembling fingers over his bald head. "I think you're wrong there, Chet. Helfer may have engineered a scheme to get hold of this ranch, but I can't believe Clovis is mixed up in it. Why, the men are actually enemies in a way."

"On the face of it, yes; actually they are working together." Chet took a turn about the room. "I'll bet Clovis suggested the borrowing from Helfer," he said, facing them once more.

"Well, yes, he did. But Helfer was the only one with ready cash."

Ailsa stood up and approached him. "I can't let you say such things about Ron. You'll say to yourself 'she loves him,' but that isn't true. It is only that Ron Clovis has been our friend, our guest here, and always a gentleman. It is very unfair for you to accuse him of such a thing."

Under other circumstances Chet would have left the house, hunted up Doc Helfer and, after settling with the fellow for Jim Goode's death, gone his own way. But he had come to like roly-poly Dorsey Barton, and that brief embrace, the kiss from Ailsa in the upper hall of the hotel had done something to him. Before him stood the only girl who had ever aroused that same emotion—Ailsa Barton, with her dark eyes and hair, her red, vivacious lips. He turned from her and started for the door.

"Where are you going, Chet?"

"After the one item of proof you will believe—Ticker Sand. We need that fella in our business." He ran down the steps and mounted his horse.

Ailsa swung upon Rink Edson. "Go with him," she ordered. "Don't let him out of your sight. They mustn't kill him."

"Sure," said Rink readily. At the door he turned, "I got a hunch; folks, that Chet Conroy is dead right in this thing."

Chet said nothing when the rider coming up behind him in the dark proved to be Rink. Together they went on across the range, answered the challenge of night guards and came, at last, to the north rim. The wild fury that had gripped Chet in Vigil had now subsided, and he went forward with caution. They didn't use the trail over the pine needle ridge but made a circle to come up to the cabin from another direction. The log cabin in the clearing seemed flat, lifeless, which didn't create any sense of safety.

They made the last hundred yards on foot and paused before the cabin door. "When Sand didn't come back, they may have gone out for him." Chet mouthed the words in Rink's ears. "Be ready!" He lifted the latch on the door and shoved with a boot. The hinges squeaked. Then they were inside, waiting in the darkness for a hint of human presence. It didn't come. Chet went forward and felt of the chair where Sand had been tied. It was empty.

"Gone, huh?" Rink struck a match and Chet dashed it from his hand.

"Be careful! Yeah, he's gone. The ropes have been cut. They came for him, and may still be around here."

"Dammit, there goes our proof!"

Chet had played it wrong; he knew that now. He should have taken Sand to the ranch and put the man under guard. But it was milk out of the pail now. He went back to the door and stared across the clearing. There where the trail went up the slope a star flickered and disappeared. His hand reached and found Rink, drew him forward. "Yonder they are, Rink. Some gent just touched off a match."

"Then we walked into something!"

"A nice trap; Sand made good bait. We'll let them come to us."

"I was a sap to light that match," muttered the foreman.

"Never make a light when you can feel," Chet informed him. He peered again into the dark. "Hope Helfer is out there," he said. "Probably him and Beck. They wasn't in town, remember."

Chet waited beside the door, ears keened to the slightest sound. Rink prowled the little cabin, moved by a curiosity aroused by Lillie's descriptions. This was where she had lived for so long.

At the end of an hour Chet left his post for a brief time. A breeze was sifting across the clearing and a plan had come to him. He found the stove and cut some thin shavings. With a fire started, he probed a shelf and found a strip of bacon. Rink was amazed at this paradoxical behavior; hadn't Chet said never to make a light under such circumstances?

The bacon was frying when Chet said, "The wind will carry the smoke and smell across the clearing and up the trail. They'll think I'm cooking—for they don't know you're here—and will settle down to wait. In the meantime we slip out and get around 'em."

"You're slicker'n an Injun," approved Rink.

They left but enough wood in the stove to carry out the ruse. The more he thought of it the less the idea of waiting for them to come had appealed to Chet. So a little later they slipped out the door and cut straight north across the clearing. It was Chet's intention to gain the trees on the far side and then circle back to where they had left their horses. But Rink Edson spoiled it all.

They were almost to the trees when the foreman stumbled over a dark mound on the ground. That mound emitted a terrified snort and heaved upward, and Rink found himself astride a strange beast. He gripped with his hands and found them full of thick hair. Flanks twisted in frantic effort to dislodge the rider. Several other dark mounds boiled up from the ground and thudded off through the trees. They had bumped into some of Jones' buffalo that had bedded down in the clearing. The noise was terrific and Chet stood there aghast. But not for long. As he sprinted forward a shot rang out behind him, and then two more. Then he tripped over Rink, who had been pitched off, and they lay there gasping while bullets ripped over their heads.

"Of all the gee dee idiots!" wailed Rink. "How'd I know them critters was camped here?"

"Shut up! Keep down low and crawl to the left. Trees just over there."

The shelter was exceedingly welcome, for the men beyond the clearing were certainly burning powder. While

Chet led the way in a wide circle toward the horses, the firing continued. It was a mad volley, sent into the clearing in the hope that some bullet would find the mark. Then abruptly it stopped. Chet, panting heavily, drew up in time to hear a pair of horses go dashing down the far slope.

"After 'em!" growled Rink, now thoroughly aroused.

They went on, came to their own mounts and swung into the saddle. Rather than waste time they headed back across the clearing, up the slope and down the far side. Beyond the bench where grew the wild parsnips, Chet's bay shied madly at some object in the air. Chet, eyes straight ahead, shot out of the saddle and came to earth on the hip still sore from its contact with Ailsa's car. He rolled over and came up swiftly, gun in hand. Off to the right Rink Edson was trying to pacify his own startled horse.

"No chance to catch 'em now," grieved the foreman five minutes later. "What happened, Chet?"

Chet was now leaning against the trunk of a near-by tree, his eyes on the object that had scared his horse. The night was too dark to make it out but he had the sudden and convincing suspicion that in daylight it wouldn't make a pretty sight. "I think," he said, "that you're safe in striking a match, Rink. Take one quick look."

"Good Lord!" gasped Edson a moment later. "It's Ticker Sand, and they've hanged him!"

"Yes," said Chet, "they hanged him."

"Why, the damn cannibals!"

"Found him in the cabin, made him confess that he'd talked to me and then paid him off in full. Well, that sort of opens the pot, Rink my friend. They know, now, that I'm wise to some things."

"If anybody had told me all this would happen here in this country, I'd have called 'em a liar. Judas, Chet, this is goin' pretty far."

They let Sand hang there until they had dug a shallow grave, using the shovel found by the wild parsnip patch; then they let him down and covered him.

"You know what I'd like to do?" said Rink when they had finished. "I'd like to gather up that ridin' crew of mine and clean up that dang town of Vigil. But Dorsey wouldn't stand for that; he's too dang peaceable for any use."

Chet rolled and smoked a cigarette; he was suddenly very weary and worn. "I hate like hell to go back without the proof I promised," he said.

"Well, you got my word for it, ain'tcha?"

"Sure, Rink; but I was hoping I could prod something more out of Sand, make him implicate Ron Clovis. The Bartons are kinda biased in regard to that gent. Which makes me play the trump card in my hand, which I was hoping to save until later."

"What's that, Chet?"

"You'll see when we get back to the ranch."

"Good! I was afraid mebbe you'd take a notion for another wild spree in Vigil. That wouldn't work out right this time; they'll be waitin' for you there."

Dawn caught up with them before they reached the ranch, and for the first time Chet actually made observation of the range extent. Plenty of feed there for all the stock and good water. No wonder men of Helfer's caliber wanted to get ownership of it. Of course there was some arrangement between his old enemy and Clovis; the latter was, no doubt, the brains behind the whole enterprise.

The day crew were at breakfast when they entered the yard, ten men in all, and looking very fit. Chet barned his horse, suspecting that the Bartons had not risen as yet. But as he and Rink headed for the cottage, Ailsa appeared on the veranda and hailed them. "Here it comes," muttered Chet as he turned that way.

"Did you bring in Sand?" she asked as they joined her.

Chet shook his head. He could tell that she had slept but little during the night. "You tell her, Rink," he said.

Rink related their adventure, blaming himself for their failure to catch the two men who had hung Sand and aimed their guns across the cabin clearing.

"You don't actually know, then, who did it," she stated.

"Well, Beck and Helfer wasn't in town last night when Chet looked for 'em."

"But we know that Ron Clovis was there," she said pointedly. "Certainly you're not accusing him of having a hand in such business." She was a bit sorry after that statement, for she saw the utter weariness in Chet's face.

"Ailsa," he said, lifting his eyes to hers, "I've made some mighty serious talk about several men, including Ron Clovis. Of course, I'm seeing the whole thing from square away, not influenced with any friendship. It's up to me to back my accusations, and I'm going to do it." He reached into a pocket and drew out a letter and a handkerchief. "I didn't want to use this unless I had to, which now seems to be the case."

Ailsa flushed when she recognized the blood-stained handkerchief. She waited while he felt of it before handing it over.

"I found it near the car the day you had the wreck. At another time I found this letter near the same spot. At first I thought it was something you'd written to Clovis, then I couldn't figure out why you should write to him when you saw him every day." Her color deepened still more. "I found this letter on the gulch road soon after the hold-up during which Clovis was cracked on the head. It must have fallen out of his pocket. Here, you read it."

"But I can't read another person's mail," she protested.

"Read it!" he insisted.

Ailsa unfolded the letter and read: "My darling Ronald: I am so sorry to hear that the gold ore vein in your mine has pinched out. I only hope the loss will not be too great. However, I am cheered by the news concerning the wonderful ranch you expect to secure. I've always wanted to live on a large ranch and I'm sure we both will be very happy on this one after we are married. Your loving Ella."

Chet watched her face closely as she read and was deeply pleased to see that no sudden anguish robbed it of its color. On the contrary, her dark eyes smoldered with rising anger. When they met his they did not falter or convey any signs of surrender to grief. He had not tried to make this a triumph of any sort, and he felt that she appreciated this.

"Thank you, Chet Conroy," was all she said. Then she turned indoors, the letter crumpled in a tight ball in her hand.

"What'd it say?" asked Rink.

"You ask her," said Chet. "I'm headed for bed and some sleep."

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when he awakened. Rink Edson was beside him on the bed, snoring a very excellent imitation of the snort of a frightened buffalo. Chet got up and dressed, slipping quietly from the cottage. Someone was sitting on the big veranda across the yard and he walked that way.

"Hello, Chet," greeted Dorsey Barton. "Come set for a minute." And when Chet had accepted the invitation, "Twink showed me that letter and I must say that it knocked us both crossways of the old branding iron. Of course we've revised our opinion concerning Clovis; rather a stiff dose of medicine, too. I suppose I've got to figure out some way in which to raise ten thousand dollars, though the Lord knows I can't think how just now."

"Where is Ailsa? I've been hoping she wouldn't be down on me for producing the letter."

"Oh, she's not down on you, Chet quite the contrary in fact. About noon she saddled up and rode off." He

stirred uneasily. "She went toward the mine."

"What! You let her go knowing that—"

"My dear chap, you've never tried to stop Ailsa from doing that which she sets her mind to. I have, with no luck. I wouldn't say for sure that she's gone over to brace Ron Clovis with your proof, but I strongly suspect such is the case."

"She never should have gone alone," Chet growled. He got to his feet. "I'm going to check up on her."

"That's your choice," said Dorsey. "Personally, I know she wouldn't come home for me." He also stood up and laid a hand on Chet's arm. "Get her, Chet, and bring her home. If anything happened to that baby sister of mine I'd just about die."

"I'll get her," Chet promised grimly and trotted toward the barn.

Five minutes later he was pounding eastward across the range, headed for the ridge above the mine gulch. In days past Jim Goode, looking at the set face of his pal, would have pronounced serious trouble for someone.

CHAPTER IX

Clovis Shows His Hand

SHORTLY after noon of that same day Ailsa Barton halted her horse on the rim above the mine and, looking down, saw the gulch road lined with scattered groups of men, all headed for Vigil. The miners were quitting, not having received the promised pay. Just for an instant doubt shook her, it was so hard to believe that Ron Clovis could be so treacherous. But she stiffened when she thought of the crumpled letter tucked away in the bosom of her blouse. She went on down the steep slope.

Clovis was in the mine office gathering up some papers. He looked up in a startled manner as she entered, but quickly recovered to assume a sad and worried expression. "Well, they've quit," he said. "I couldn't pay them and— Why, what's the matter, Ailsa? You look so strange!"

"Indeed? Well, perhaps I have good cause." She produced the letter and handed it to him. "Can you explain this?"

Clovis read quickly and a white ring formed about his mouth. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"It was picked up from the road near the scene of the hold-up. It must have come out of your pocket with the bundle of currency."

"Oh, yes; quite likely." He leaned against the chart table and looked at her. "I can explain it, Ailsa. It's quite true that I know a girl named Ella. We—we were engaged. That was before I met you and fell so madly in love with you." He waited to see the effects of his words.

"Go on," she said coldly.

"Since then," he frankly confessed, "I've been trying to break off with her, to do it in a gentle, kindly way. I admit that I lied when I wrote her the vein had pinched out, but it was merely to try and show her that we couldn't be married. The ranch I spoke of was mere fancy, for I didn't intend to get one. Later on I would tell her that it hadn't worked out; that I was broke and must seek new fields."

"What an honorable gentleman you turned out to be!"

"Believe me, Ailsa, I did it because I love you so." His voice became husky and he advanced with arms outstretched.

"Don't you dare touch me!" backing off. "You're trying to ruin Dorsey and me and get our ranch. Chet Conroy knows all about it."

"That fellow! He's cooked up some story to put me in a bad light. He loves you and wants you for himself, that's why. Ailsa, you can't believe such a thing. It's utterly fantastic, preposterous. True, we're all in a tight fix just now, but I'm taking steps. I've sent the truck driver to Sioux Center to sell the truck. I've

planned to go there myself and make a desperate attempt to raise money."

"When the vein has pinched out?" she inquired caustically.

"I tell you the vein hasn't pinched out; it's as wide as ever and just as rich. Why, I'll prove it. Just come with me."

"No!"

He stood with hands clenched by his sides. "Ailsa, I won't let you get any such notions about me. Let me prove myself, I beg you. When you see that rich vein, you'll understand that what I say is true. For the sake of my feelings toward you, let me prove it."

She wasn't totally convinced by his eloquence, and yet she relented to the extent that she let him take her arm and guide her toward the mine. They passed through the mill with its huge stamps now silent, on up a slight incline to a dark hole pierced by a narrow gauge railway. As they entered the hole he took a flash-light from his pocket and shot the beam ahead.

Ailsa had never been in a mine, and the cold air, the deep silence and the knowledge that she was underground sent a chill through her. But Ron Clovis talked assuringly, pointing out certain spots, explaining the tunnels which branched off from the main shaft. Exploration tunnels, he said, to prove certain things. The main vein lay ahead. And at last they left the large tunnel itself and entered a smaller one. The present working spot was just ahead. Soon she would see the vein with its rich ore gleaming in the light of his torch. They came to an iron door which barred their way.

"Now!" he said triumphantly. "You'll notice that we keep this door in place when we're not working." He lifted a heavy iron hasp from sockets sunk in the rock wall. The door swung back on squeaking hinges. "Enter the chamber of gold," he said and his voice echoed hollowly in the darkness ahead. Ailsa went forward.

"But I don't see—" The clang of the door drowned her voice. "You shut it, Ron! Why did you, Ron? Ron Clovis!" She spun around and groped about. "Where are you?" There was no answer. "Open this door immediately!" She ran her hands over the smooth, hard surface and felt no handle or knob. Sudden, stark terror seized her and she began beating at the metal with her fists. "Open! Open it! You—beast, you traitor, open this door!" Her voice came back in thunderous waves from the dark depths of the cavern above. "You can't do this to me, I tell you. If you don't let me out of here Chet Conroy will kill you!"

Kill you—kill you—kill you—came the echo, and nothing more. Her hands slipped down the door as she sank to the ground. Here she sat in wide-eyed terror, conscious only that she was alone beneath a mountain of rock, in darkness so deep she could not see the door before her. Ron Clovis had done this to her after she had trusted him.

That was it! She had trusted him. What a little fool she had been! With proof in her hands, she had let him sway her better judgment. She should have suspected something when she saw him tear that incriminating letter to bits there outside the mine entrance—out there where there was daylight, where just beyond the sun shone. Now there was nothing but darkness and silence. Would they ever find her? She dropped her face in her hands and began to sob.

There was no way of marking the time in that place; she dared not move from her position near the door for fear of falling into some hole. When she felt a wild desire to scream she picked up small stones and tossed them to the rear, listening eagerly for them to strike, for even such small sounds gave a measure of comfort. She tried to tell herself that this was but temporary imprisonment; that Ron Clovis would come back to bargain with her. But this was a small sustaining hope. And thus did she pass several dreadful hours.

IT WAS not yet six o'clock when Chet Conroy halted the lathered bay before the mine office. From the ridge above he thought he'd seen a movement of some kind below, but now the place seemed deserted. He stalked into the office and peered about. Everything indicated hasty departure. He looked into the back room where he had stood with hands raised during the concentrate robbery. It, too, was empty. The miners and Clovis had gone. Probably Ailsa, finding the place deserted, had followed them to Vigil.

Outside again he had a foot in the stirrup when a shrill whinny came from some place beyond the mill. He waited, listening intently. When it came again he located the sound and headed for it. Beyond the mill was a long, clapboard bunkhouse stilted up on the slope. It was behind the far end of this building that he found Ailsa's horse. He led the animal back to his own and waited for a time. When she did not appear he called her name. There was no answer.

"Danged funny," he muttered. "Maybe she went to town with him on the truck. Hell, is she going to let that buzzard talk her out of it?" He stood there beside the two horses, a puzzled frown on his face. Above all things, he didn't want to go back to the ranch without her. He'd told Dorsey he would bring her home. The more he thought of her going to Vigil the less logical that seemed. No, she must be somewhere about.

Then, as sudden thoughts had a way of doing, one struck him abruptly. Of course that was it, and just like her. She'd come here, found the place deserted and, just to make sure the letter spoke the truth, had gone into the mine to see if the vein had pinched out. But why take so long about it? Dorsey said she'd left at noon.

He prowled through the mill and came to the mine entrance. As he hesitated here he saw some bits of paper on the ground. They were in small pieces, but he had no difficulty in patching enough of them together to recognize the letter he had found on the gulch road. But most certainly she would not tear up such valuable evidence. Again much concerned, he viewed the dark hole just ahead.

In an empty dynamite box he found a number of new candles. Taking several, he went on in, following the rails of the track. When darkness engulfed him he struck a match and lighted a candle. It was necessary to shield the flame, as cold air flowed through the tunnel. He went on for a hundred yards or more, until he came to the first branching tunnel. Knowing enough about mining to recognize it as an exploration shunt, he passed by. He did the same to the next three tunnels and came, at last, to the end of the track. With candle held high, he looked about. Straight ahead was the blank wall, with just a trace of vein across it. This was where the pinch-out had occurred. So he turned back.

"Maybe she's lost in one of the side tunnels," he said, and decided to explore each one in turn as he retraced his steps. The first one he came to went off to his left and he walked quickly up the smaller tube. After a hundred feet or more it widened a trifle and he saw an iron door, closed and with hasp in place. Of course she wouldn't be beyond the door, it wasn't humanly possible to enter and close it behind one in such a fashion. He turned away, then halted. By rare chance she might have propped up the iron bar and, the door sucking shut with some draught, the bar might fall into place. He hoisted it, swung the door open part way and called her name.

"Wh-what? Is that— Oh, Chet!" A frenzied little bundle launched out of the darkness and struck his chest, knocking the candle out of his hand. It sputtered and went out as he wrapped his arms about her, held her close.

"Twink, you little rascal, what on earth are you doing in this place?"

"He—he brought me here to show me that the vein hadn't—"

"You mean Ron Clovis?"

"Yes. And he closed the door so that—"

A hard shoulder struck Chet in the back and sent him sprawling across Ailsa. Before he could scramble to his feet the iron door clanged shut and the bar dropped into place. Chet crouched for a spring but checked himself in time. It would be folly to waste strength against that barrier of iron. Someone had been waiting in a dark niche of the tunnel.

"Chet, it's—it's closed again?"

"Yes, blast his shriveled soul. He must have seen me come in and followed." He felt around for the candle that had been knocked from his hand, couldn't find it and lighted another. As the small flame burned up he looked into her face, now streaked with dust and tears. "What a hell of an experience for you," he said.

Her chin quivered as she tried to smile. "But now you're here, you—you old patriot."

They sat down on a flat rock a short distance from the door and exchanged experiences. Ailsa told him how she had faced Clovis with the letter and all that had ensued; Chet explained how he had come to enter the mine. After which he rose and examined the chamber which formed their cell. It was quite large, with a high, domed ceiling lined with wide cracks. Huge clumps of rock clung there, ready to fall with any undue jar. The walls of the place rose smoothly on all sides save the one opposite the door. Here the wall was hidden under a large slide of loose rock which had caved from the ceiling. The reason for the iron door was plain enough; it was meant to keep people out of the place.

"Chet, will he leave us here to die?"

"Certainly not." He set the candle on the rock and rolled a cigarette. "That letter did the trick. When he found out that we knew the whole plot, he got desperate. Getting you into this place was a clever move, for he could use it as a leverage against Dorsey. With me in here too, well, they'll have things their own way. Dorsey will either give up the ranch on notice of foreclosure or we'll never be seen again."

"I could kill Ron Clovis," she panted in sudden rage.

"I'm going to," he said calmly. "Of course, they may get to me first, having me penned up in this dump, but I'll give 'em a run for their money." He was speaking calmly, using a tone of voice meant to assure her and take her mind from their present predicament.

A brief silence ensued during which a rock half the size of a man's body fell from the ceiling and struck the pile of rock against the wall. The crash sent Ailsa into his arms and, as the candle sputtered with the rush of air, her dark eyes were pools of terror.

"Chet," she gasped, "we may be killed in here before anything else can happen."

He sighted at the rocks above and was forced to nod somberly. His arms tightened about her, drew her close.

"But I don't want to die," she protested. "I'm young yet, and so are you. All of life is before us. Together we could—"

"Together?" he picked up quickly.

She hid her face from him and did not answer. But after a time he heard her whispering and said, "What?"

"I—I was just trying to think of a prayer, Chet. I'm afraid I haven't been very good that way."

"Here, here," he said sternly. "It hasn't come to that. We won't cross any bridges before we come to them. No telling how long those big rocks will hang up there before falling. We'll just keep quiet, make no loud noises or walk around."

From that time on they conversed in whispers. Dust and emotion had dried Ailsa's throat and she was very thirsty,

but she did not complain. They sat side by side on the rock, watching the candle burn away. When she suggested putting it out to save it, he told her he had two more in his pocket. And thus did the hours drag by.

"It must be night, Chet," she said at last.

"Night? Why, it was six o'clock or later when I came in here. It must be nearer morning."

"Do you suppose Dorsey is out looking for us?"

"Hard to say, Twink. If they are, they'll never think to look in this mine. Not a very cheerful patriot, am I?"

He fashioned another cigarette and started to reach for the candle. It wasn't until then that he noticed the steady bend of the flame. His eyes narrowed sharply and he held his breath. Ailsa sensed his tense attitude and inquired the cause.

"There's a draught in here," he said, "and where there's a draught there's an opening of some kind. Watch the candle flame."

"It bends toward the door," she murmured after a short time.

Chet turned around on the rock and looked toward the shadowed slide which rose steeply to the far wall. "Comes from yonder. Maybe there's a crack at the top." He got slowly to his feet.

"Chet, you're not going to crawl up that slide! Why, it may turn loose all those rocks up above."

"Got to chance it, Twink. That fresh air comes in up there and I want to know how. You wait here with the candle."

"No. I won't be crushed all alone. If you're going up there, so am I. If the rock falls we'll die together."

Their eyes met briefly. "All right," he said. "Move carefully though."

The slide was composed of sharp rocks of varying sizes, and as they began the perilous creep up the side those sharp edges cut into their knees and hands. They could go only a foot or so at a time, and in between efforts Chet held the candle aloft and stared ahead. He noticed that the flame bent almost horizontal, could feel the stream of cool air against his face. There must be a crack up there.

Half an hour later they were halfway up to where the slide joined the ceiling. Here they rested for some minutes, watching and waiting as rock kicked loose behind them stirred ominous echoes in the chamber. From then on the climb was even steeper and they had to lie flat and crawl to make any progress.

At last they were but an arm's length from the place where the domed ceiling met the top of the slide. Chet reached upward and a gust of wind whipped out the candle flame. Ailsa nervously grasped his arm. "Steady," he said. "That wind means there are cracks up here. I'm going to remove a few of the rocks."

He clamped his fingers over a stone and lifted it down. The draught became stronger, and thus encouraged he began moving more of the barrier. Ailsa lay beside him, feeling the pull and stretch of his lean muscles. But suddenly they tensed; he reached down and laid a hand across her lips. And it was then that she heard voices that seemed to fall from the ceiling. Actually the sound came through the breach he had widened.

"You can see, Doc, that the vein pinched out back here. I've kept working in this drift just as a stall. That last concentrate is mostly mercury. The ranch deal isn't breaking any too soon."

"No, I reckon not. Just the same, Clovis, I wish you'd of let the thing run itself out. I could of foreclosed at the end of ten days. Barton wouldn't be able to get the money by that time. This business of pennin' up his sister is dang likely to bring things to a head afore I'm ready."

"It was the only way out, Doc. She'd found a letter that gave me away. Remember, I got Conroy in there too."

"That's the best part of the trick. So

long as that fella was runnin' loose, we could expect trouble. But I'm still worried about the gal. When she don't show up that whole dang outfit will turn out to hunt for her, and I sort of imagine them boys are salty once they get het up."

"But don't you see our advantage? Even though Barton does know about that letter, he'll be too busy hunting Ailsa to think much about the mortgage. He may never connect the two. Then, if he puts up a fight when you come to foreclosure, we'll lay on the pressure. We've got his sister, and he can play the game or else."

"Yeah," doubtfully, "I see all that. I don't claim no wings, Clovis, but just the same I believe we're goin' plenty far with this deal. A straight foreclosure and what leads up to it don't bother me, but shuttin' a gal up in a mine comes dang near bein' a crime. It sure means one thing: Conroy will have to be blotted outa the picture."

The voices became fainter as the two men retraced their steps down the tunnel. "Did you hear?" whispered Chet.

"Yes, I heard. It makes me curl inside to think that I ever was friendly with Ron Clovis."

"Well, he's due for a surprise. You hang on to my belt while I lift down more rock. The end of the main tunnel is just ahead of us," Chet said.

Gradually an aperture was formed. Chet placed each rock down carefully, waiting to be sure it didn't roll. When the hole was large enough he thrust his shoulders through, leaned down and struck a match. The floor of the main tunnel lay directly below, some fifteen feet down.

"All right, Twink. Move up here, turn around and put your legs through. I'll hold your hands and let you down as far as possible. There'll be some drop, but you land with knees bent."

This was done, Ailsa landing with a soft thud and assuring him immediately that she was not hurt. Chet worked his own body around, got his legs out and felt for the sharp ledge. In so doing he dislodged a rock which plunged down the slide. It set up a vibration which in turn started an ominous crackling in the ceiling above. Two or three rocks broke loose to plunge into the slide. Then came a sharp suckling sound and a deafening roar.

He could not stop to steady himself for the drop and went down that fifteen feet off balance. He struck the hard floor on his bruised hip and fell over backward. Stunned and in pain, he lay there, conscious after a while that hands were groping for his face.

(To be continued in the next issue.)

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Trail's End Roll Call

Here, folks, are some more new members to welcome into your club:

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Mr. Melvin Boyd, Jr., R. 1, Maylene, Ala.
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Mr. Vincent Fasano, 115 E. Walnut St., Lock Haven, Penna.
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11-12-37

Evolution of

In this issue Mr. Ward concludes his short article on how the cowboy came about. In the next issue he will go on to tell you about the round-up equipment the cowboy uses.

TEXAS COWHAND OF 1870.

MONTANA, OR NORTHERN COWHAND.

MODERN RODEO ROPER.

DURING the period from 1865 to 1895 the cowhand and his equipment changed materially. In California the Spanish methods and equipment have retained their influence upon the outfits of the cowhand much more strongly than in any other part of the cow country north of the Mexican Border.

When the northern trails were closed, the northern cowhand became a reality and the equipment and methods he used were the result of Texas and California influence which was fused into a distinct type. Thus the cowhand of the north was as easily distinguished and recognized as the cowhand of Texas or California.

The Texas, California and Montana cowhands are the same type of individual. They differ one from the others only in the style of equipment and methods used in their work. This difference is brought about largely by the conditions of climate and the type of country in which their equipment is used.

As a species the cowhand is no particular breed of human, but he is a type. He is an individual who is possessed of a pioneering spirit, who glories in adventure and who is a lover of nature in the raw. He is endowed with the nerve to take a chance and smile at the results, whether he loses or wins. And he is able to take it on the chin and keep coming back for more.

the Cowboy

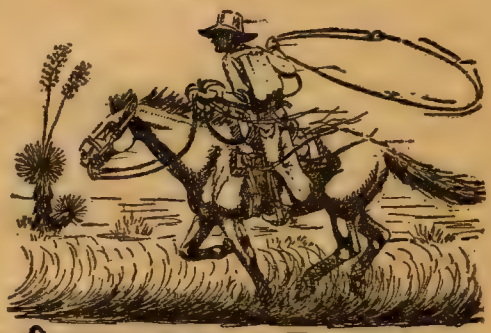
By Fay Ward

The professional rodeo hand is a product of the cow country, generally speaking, and is of the same type as the average cowhand. As a rule he is a top-hand who has been schooled in the actual work of riding and roping where skyscrapers seldom grow. Because of the inducements offered in cash prizes to the winners of the various roping and riding events, and the thrill of winning over the best men in the game, some of the best riders and ropers have become professional rodeo contestants, and have made history which will long be remembered. The rodeo contestant is fast becoming a popular figure wherever he is seen in action.

Rodeo work is highly specialized and every move that a contestant makes is carefully planned to save time. The equipment used is designed and arranged to promote speed and efficiency. The odds against the contestant winning are, by far, greater than in any other line of sport, because of the strong competition. It is more dangerous than any other sport being featured before the American public today.

The cowhand and the range stock industry are so closely allied that it is impossible to present an outline of the evolution of the cowboy without writing the history of the cow country and the stock industry, but it is hoped that this brief summary will give the reader an idea as to the "howcome" of the cowhand and his outfit.

EARLY CALIFORNIA-NEVADA HAND.



SOUTHWESTERN TYPE OF RIDER.

MODERN RODEO BRONC RIDER.

OUT OF THE

Editor's Note:

Tex Sherman, who gives us the latest news of the rodeo world, is a real Westerner. He has punched cows and broken horses throughout the West. He has been rodeo contestant, announcer and judge himself, and is known from coast to coast.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

JOE HENDERSON, that grand old man of the Malta, Montana, Rodeo, put his show into big time this year. Neither money nor effort is spared by Joe who personally manages it and furnishes the live-stock. It is this old-timer's guess that the Malta Rodeo will be one of the West's biggest outfits in a few years, although it is only five years old now.

The Covered Wagon Days Rodeo, staged at Redondo Beach, California, played to a crowd of seventeen thousand people in two days. This rodeo is staged under the auspices of the Empty Saddle Club. George Demaree and Johnny Runnells furnished the salty live-stock; Sid Bennett directed the arena events and Norman Sproul did a first-class job of announcing. The competent judges were Ray McCarrell and Jack Courtney. The contestants went home chanting loud praises of these judges and rodeo officials.

Business at the local hospital of Centralia, Washington, did a land-office business during the recent rodeo staged there. Roy Green sustained a possible fractured skull when a horse kicked him. Although he is coming along pretty good right now, he will be out of rodeo for this year, at least. Howard Brown suffered a broken leg when a wild Brahma steer charged him, knocking him down and trampling him. Al Worten received an arm injury but that won't keep him away from the next arena.

One full minute's silence was observed by the audience at the Sun Valley, Idaho, Rodeo, in memory of the great Pete Knight who was killed by a bronc and laid to rest in full cowboy regalia in that town last May. Pete was a four-time winner of the championship title in bronc-riding, and was honored as the man whose career was symbolic of the highest in sportsmanship and courage in the world of Western sports.

Candy Hammer and Joe Greer will direct the rodeo events for the Chicago Stadium Rodeo when it opens October 14th and runs to the end of the month. As you read this, both the Chicago and New York City rodeos will be in full swing. Many folks are wondering which show will have more contestants. Although Chicago is nearer the stamping grounds of most rodeo stars, New York is a great drawing card and more prize monies will be paid there. Chicago, however, is paying out fifteen thousand dollars with a guarantee of three thousand dollars in entry fees, and that's plenty money for any cowboy to shoot at.

The Black Hills Round-Up, staged annually at Belle Fourche, S. D., gave the folks a run for their money. The attendance was much greater than had been expected and the show paid off in full. Leo Murray took top money in the bronc-riding event. This is the fourth consecutive year that he has taken first money in this event. Hub Whiteman of Clarksville, Texas, went to town in the bulldogging and threw his steer in 3⅘ seconds. While this

is remarkably fast time, it doesn't beat the world's record, although it equals it, as Shorty Ricker threw a steer in that time in 1933 and Bill MacMacken did the same trick in 1935. Hal Hillman, arena director, put on a fast-moving program for the crowd.

Candy Hammer and his rodeo will be the outstanding attraction of the Eastern States Exposition in Springfield, Mass. The management of the Exposition decided to lay off rodeos for two years, but this year is giving the crowds what they want again.

Tommy Linker (better known as "Wagon-yard") forgot to duck when a wild Brahma steer took after him, and now he (Wagon-yard, not the steer) is out of rodeo for the rest of the season with a broken leg. Pat Flashette is suffering from a fractured shoulder and Poncho Villa got a broken rib when the steer with which he was burlesquing a bullfight charged him and threw him over its head. Poncho is a famous steer-fighter who has made spectators yell for many years when he puts on this thrilling event.

Charles B. Paul, of the Rochester Rodeo Association, is going to stage two rodeos this year and later plans to make a circuit of New York State, giving Easterners a taste of the real West. His rodeo in Troy, N. Y., promises to be as salty as the one in Rochester.

Milt Hinkle, owner of the famous Texas Rangers Rodeo, has leased Homer Todd's stock for the Mid-South Fair at Memphis, Tenn. Hinkle has several other outfits playing throughout the country. Mr. Fuller, secretary of the Fair, says that he has found no other attraction the equal of rodeo in drawing crowds, and he is also having Graham's Western Riders put on their famous show for the Fair.

Pat Christman and his charming wife, Mildred, who at one time was one of the most famous of all cowgirls and a great bronc-rider, own a goat act called Christman's Aristocratic Goats, comprised of several Angora goats with their horns painted a golden color. These pets have a host of rodeo friends and deserve a niche in rodeo's Hall of Fame. Pat is an old-timer who went into the movies with Tom Mix when he left the Young Buffalo Wild West Show years ago, and has been foreman for Tom Mix now for over twenty years.

The following trophy donors to Rodeo Association of America Champions are:

Levi Strauss & Co., $500 to the Grand Champion Cowboy.

Harry Rowell, rodeo stock contractor of Hayward, Calif., $200 to the Champion Bronc-rider. Maxwell McNutt, R.A.A. President, will also give $100 to this champion.

West Holliday Co., $100 to the Champion Bull- or Steer-rider.

N. Porter Saddle Co., $100 to the Champion Calf-roper.

H. J. Justin Boot Co., $100 to the Champion Team-roper.

Stetson Hat Co., $100 to the Champion Steer-wrestler.

Howard-Buick Auto Co., $100 to the Champion Steer-decorator.

Chicago Stadium Rodeo, $100 to the Champion Bareback rider.

Keystone Bros. Saddlery, $100 to the Champion Single roper.

Rodeo fans and contestants alike appreciate the generous gifts of these persons and firms.

Jerry Litterell, who was suspended from participating in any R.A.A. rodeos after being accused of attacking Harry Knight, judge of the Sonoma Rodeo, over a decision, has been reinstated by the R.A.A. board.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES in all parts of the world. Its purpose is to help readers make friends with people everywhere, near and far, at home and abroad.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter you find printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those people who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing practical jokes, and particularly ask you not to sign your letters with other people's names.

"A Long Way from Home"

Dear Editor:

I am a soldier in the Panama Canal Zone and it gets very lonesome at times. I am twenty-three years old, six feet two inches tall and have light brown hair and blue eyes. I collect snaps and play the accordian. Won't someone please write to a lonesome soldier a long way from home?

Sincerely,
WILLIAM WOLFF.

P. O. Box 6,
Fort Sherman,
Panama Canal Zone

From the Tall Corn State

Dear Editor:

I am another interested reader of RANCH ROMANCES. I think the stories are great, and to make everything more interesting, I would appreciate corresponding with friendly pen pals. I am thirty-six years old, five feet five inches tall and have gray eyes. I promise to answer all letters.

Sincerely,
MISS HELEN WHEELER.

925—4th Ave.,
Council Bluffs, Iowa

Faithful Reader

Dear Editor:

I have been a faithful reader of the Double R for the past ten years. How about a bit of space for such a faithful reader? I am a soldier in the U. S. Army Medical Department and have almost seven years of this work behind me. I am five feet eleven inches tall and am of Scotch-Irish and German blood.

Sincerely,
JOSEPH TITUS.

Station Hospital,
Camp Holabird,
Baltimore, Md.

Scottish Seamen

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely Scotch seamen who enjoy RANCH ROMANCES. We wish some of you country girls would help us fill our lonely hours.

Sincerely,
BILL WORK,
ANDY MACOLMSON.

S/S Dunvegan Head,
c/o Hendry and Macgregor,
11 Dock Place, Leith,
Scotland

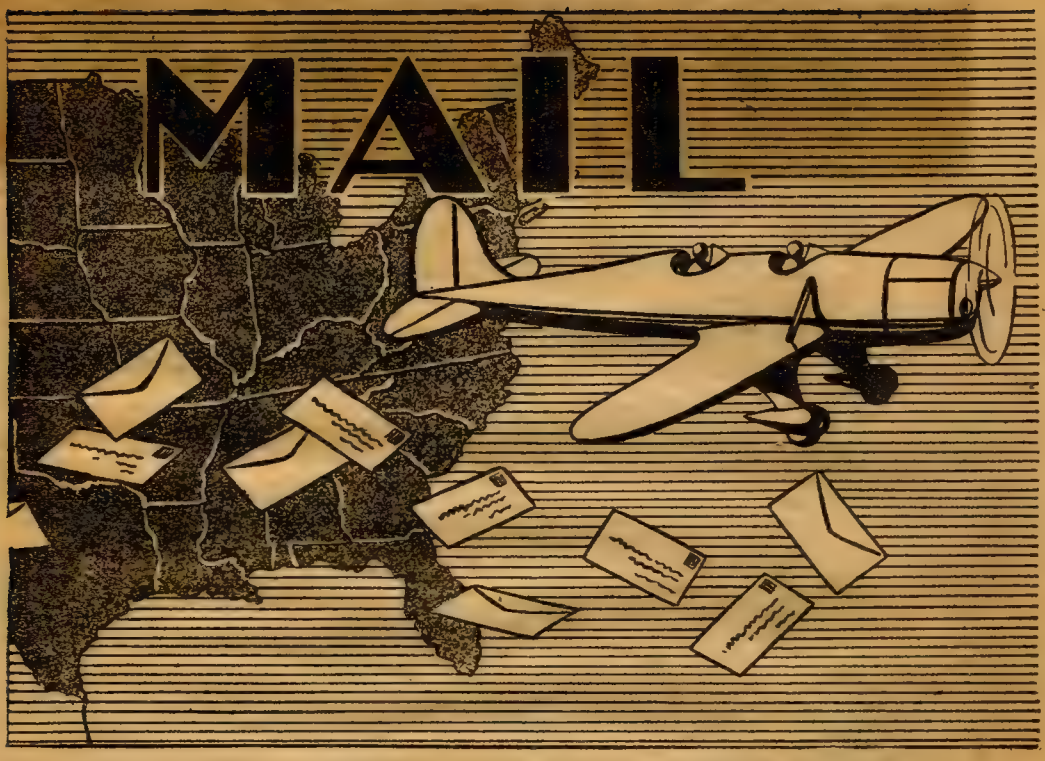
Two Tennessee Girls

Dear Editor:

We read all the R. R. stories and can scarcely wait for each new issue. This is a special plea for cowboys, soldiers and CCC boys to write to us. We will exchange snaps of ourselves and views of the mountains around here. Please drop us a line.

Sincerely,
JUANITA MUNDY,
GLADYS DOUGLAS.

47 Knox St.,
Knoxville, Tenn.



Born and Reared in Saddle

Dear Editor:

Would any kind-hearted boy or girl between the ages of sixteen and twenty be interested in writing to an eighteen-year-old boy? I have dark brown hair and eyes and I'm five feet ten inches tall. I can tell you all about the West as I was born and reared in the saddle.

Sincerely,
MILTON FRANCE.

Box 42,
Thorp, Wash.

"Ridden the Range Together"

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely cowgirls and have ridden the range together. Myra is fifteen and will be glad to tell about Montana and her saddle horses. Alta is sixteen and will tell you about the hills of Old Montana. We would like to hear from some cowboys.

Sincerely,
MYRA SIMENSON,
ALTA MANN.

Benrud, Mont.

"Ranches, Cowboys and Indians"

Dear Editor:

I would like to write to some miss living up in the northeastern part of the country who would like to hear about ranches, cowboys and Indians that I know about. I am eighteen years old and like all sports.

Sincerely,
JOHNNY QUINTON.

Coweta, Okla.

"West of West"

Dear Editor:

How about some letters winging westward to Honolulu Harbor? I would like pen pals from twenty to thirty years old. Hawaii is really west of the West and with the Clippers annihilating space, the twain do meet. Perhaps this is heresy, but I think your departments are just as much fun as your stories.

Sincerely,
JOSEPH AKAI.

P. O. Box 1712,
Honolulu, Hawaii

Eastern Horsewoman

Dear Editor:

My husband and I have been reading R. R. for over seven years, and believe me, there's no other magazine like it. I would like to secure some pen pals—cowgirls and ranch women, or anyone who has anything to do with horses. I am very fond of them and own several saddle horses. I am thirty-one years old and will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
MRS. WALTER HUSSEY.

Box 801,
Rochester, N. H.

The Land of Mañana

Dear Editor:

Will you give a bit of space to a girl who hails from "The Land of Mañana"? I am seventeen years old and have blond hair and gray-green eyes. I would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world.

Sincerely,
EILEEN FONDY.

P. O. Box 797,
Taos, N. M.

Ambitious Rider

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely girl of fifteen. I have dark brown curly hair and blue eyes. I am especially fond of horseback riding, and some day I want to become a good rodeo rider. I have read RANCH ROMANCES for the past three years.

Sincerely,
AUDREY HARDING.

Box 72,
Kaycee, Wyo.

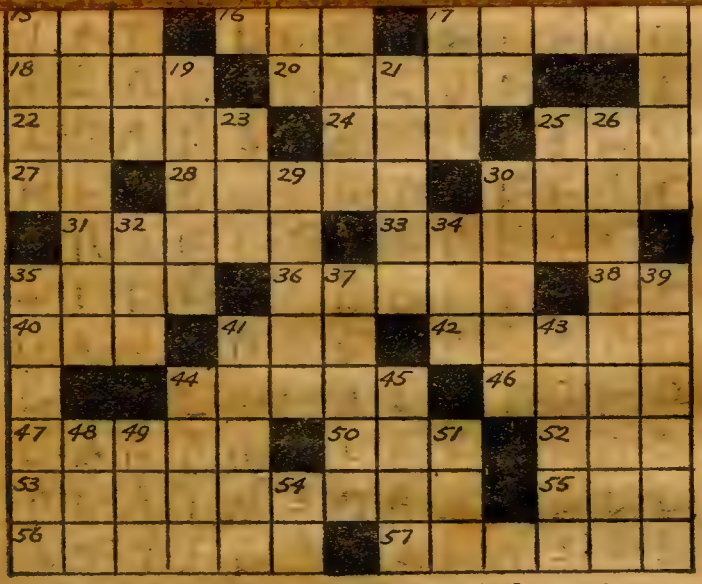
Connecticut Lassie

Dear Editor:

I would like to have friends all over the world. I am twenty-one years old, five feet four inches tall and have black hair and brown eyes. I like swimming, hiking and fishing. I will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
CAROLYN DANDIO.

R. 2, Box 90,
North Guilford, Conn.



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

Across

1. Spheres of action
6. To graze, as a bullet
12. An impost
13. A native of the West
15. A high explosive
16. To permit
17. Apple juice
18. A measure of land
20. A vicious animal
22. Protective covering for the legs
24. A negative connective
25. To possess
27. A pronoun
28. Not inner
30. An extraordinary act
31. An entertainment showing features of cowboy life
33. To gush forth
35. Broad; spacious
36. Woody perennial plants
38. A plural ending
40. Held; owned
41. The honey-making insect
42. Sprightly; lively
44. A small marine animal
46. To reverberate
47. To work
50. A sheltered place
52. Imitation of an owl's cry
53. An inhabitant of the plains
55. An addition to a house
56. Fashions
57. Faculties

Solution to First November puzzle

Down

1. To append
2. A ranchero's dwelling place
3. Beyond what is due
4. A shoemaker's tool
5. A prophet
6. Cent (Abbr.)
7. To happen again
8. A great lake
9. A conjunction
10. To perceive
11. Given to wandering
14. A rock
19. A kind of lyric poem
21. European furze
23. To pay suit
25. Over (Contr.)
26. A spring
29. One who carries
30. A railroad signal
32. Peculiar
34. Liveliness; energy
35. Contemptible persons
37. A kingdom
39. Backless seats
41. Carried
43. Suffers pain
44. To wind up
45. Meadows
48. High in the scale
49. A reddish brown horse
51. A point of the compass (Abbr.)
54. Steamship (Abbr.)

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page 143

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page 144

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